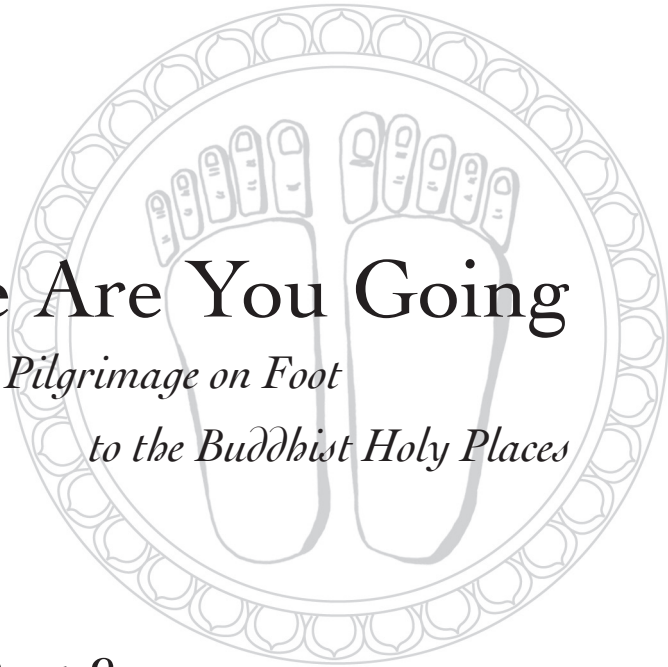
Great Patient One



Where Are You Going

A Pilgrimage on Foot
to the Buddhist Holy Places

Part 2:
Great Patient One

Ajahn Sucitto and Nick Scott

For Free Distribution

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England

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Dedicated to

Mah Poi Nu and Lee Toh Mooi
Mah Khing Yow
Mah Chin Hin and Mah Chin Chuan



Maha Khanti, the "Great Patient One."
Drawing by Ajahn Sucitto.

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Acknowledgements

Where Are You Going was originally photocopied and passed around the Western Ajahn Chah monasteries in the early 2000s. Several years later Wisdom Publications published the first part as *Rude Awakenings Two Englishmen on Foot in Buddhism's Holy Land*, which is still available. Now at last, thanks to the very generous sponsorship of Sian Mah, who wanted to read the second part and offered to publish it, we can satisfy the many other requests to see it. He has also kindly offered to release the first half as a companion volume for free distribution under the title *Where Are You Going: A Pilgrimage on Foot to the Buddhist Holy Places. Part 1: Rude Awakenings*

In *Rude Awakenings* we thanked all those who had helped us with *Where Are You Going*, so here we need only repeat our thanks to David Kittelstrom, our excellent and patient editor at Wisdom who edited and laid out this volume in his own time, and Bhikkhu Chandako and Bhikkhu Hiriko, who kindly and very diligently proofread it.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
May my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue,
My mother, my father and my relatives
The sun and the moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world
May the highest gods and evil forces;
Celestial beings, guardian spirits of the Earth and the Lord of Death;
May those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile;
May all beings receive the blessings of my life.
May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realise the Deathless.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
And through this act of sharing,
May all desires and attachments quickly cease
And all harmful states of mind.
Until I realise Nibbana,
In every kind of birth, may I have an upright mind
With mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigour.
May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.
The Buddha is my excellent refuge,
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma,
The solitary Buddha is my noble Lord,
The Sangha is my supreme support.
Through the supreme power of all these,
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.

Prologue

This book is a sequel. The first half, published as *Rude Awakenings*, began the account of a six-month epic journey by two Englishmen, a monk and layman, to the Buddhist holy places in India. On this seven-hundred-mile pilgrimage on foot across one of the most overcrowded places on the planet, we supported ourselves by going for alms—just as Buddhist monks had done in times gone by—and slept under the stars. *Rude Awakenings* was a great adventure story. While the second part of the journey still had its share of adventure, and some amazing encounters with wildlife, the novelty of the endeavour had worn off, and we came face to face with both our own and the other's deeper humanity. Thus this sequel is, to us, the more valuable of the two accounts.

You needn't have read *Rude Awakenings* to enjoy and share our trials, joys, and lessons here, but some scene setting may make the story clearer. Ajahn Sucitto was neither the abbot of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery nor the well-known teacher he is today when his teacher, Ajahn Sumedho, chose him in response to Nick's invitation to take a Buddhist monk on pilgrimage, and Nick was still a wildlife warden. The walk began appropriately at Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace just inside the border of Nepal. From there we crossed into the Indian state of Bihar, now the poorest, most crowded, and most backward of India's states but once the heart of Indian civilisation and the site of many of the events from the Buddha's life.

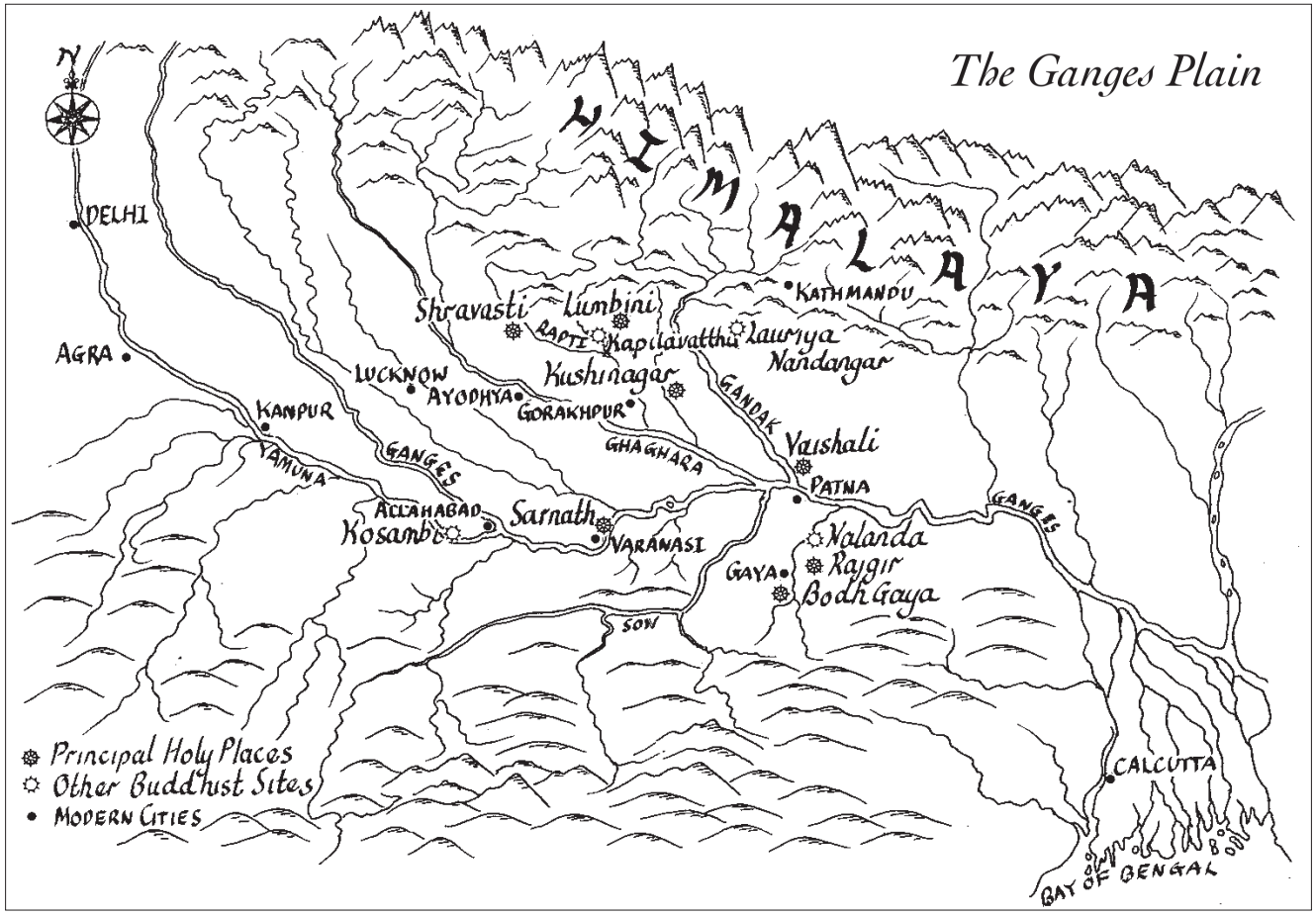
In the autumn of 1990, when our pilgrimage began, the days were

still searing hot, and almost everywhere we rested, throngs of inquisitive people would instantaneously appear. We would often trudge on until nightfall just to find somewhere we could be left alone, setting up a small shrine for chanting and feeble attempts at meditation before falling asleep dog-tired. After another puja and meditation just after dawn, we might get a few miles in before the heat began. Towards the end of each morning we'd enter a village, sit down somewhere, and wait for an invitation to eat—which, amazingly enough, nearly always came. Initially, Ajahn Sucitto wanted to eat just once a day, but slowly the arduousness of what we were trying to do led to a small plate of chickpeas or some biscuits with the morning stop at a chai stall. The support and generosity we received seemed almost magical—only three days did we go hungry.

At first the dominant challenge was the physical strain—walking in the heat day after day sustained by inadequate nutrition and run down by bouts of dysentery. Small cuts festered, Ajahn Sucitto developed a foot injury, and protein deficiency kept us from even thinking straight. Then the differences in our personalities began to exact a toll: Nick pursued the remnants of wildlife left amidst all that humanity, whereas Ajahn Sucitto with his commitment to transcendence wasn't interested in scenery. He just wanted to go inwards.

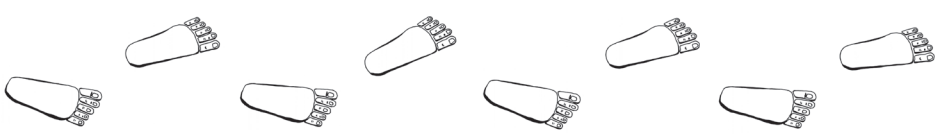
At Rajgir, a favourite resort of the Buddha, we hit bottom. In the first real forest we had come to, we were attacked and robbed by bandits who appeared from the woods, machetes in hand. Nearly everything was lost: money, passports, camping gear, camera, even most of our clothes. However, as is so often the case with India, disaster had a benign side: having been stripped almost bare, we were lifted up and penetrated more deeply by the generosity and kindness of others. In material terms we gained new clothes and equipment and enough money for train tickets to Calcutta, where we hoped to replace our passports, travellers' cheques, and air tickets so that we could continue. But the vulnerability also left us humbler, lighter, and freer. India had worked us over and, in

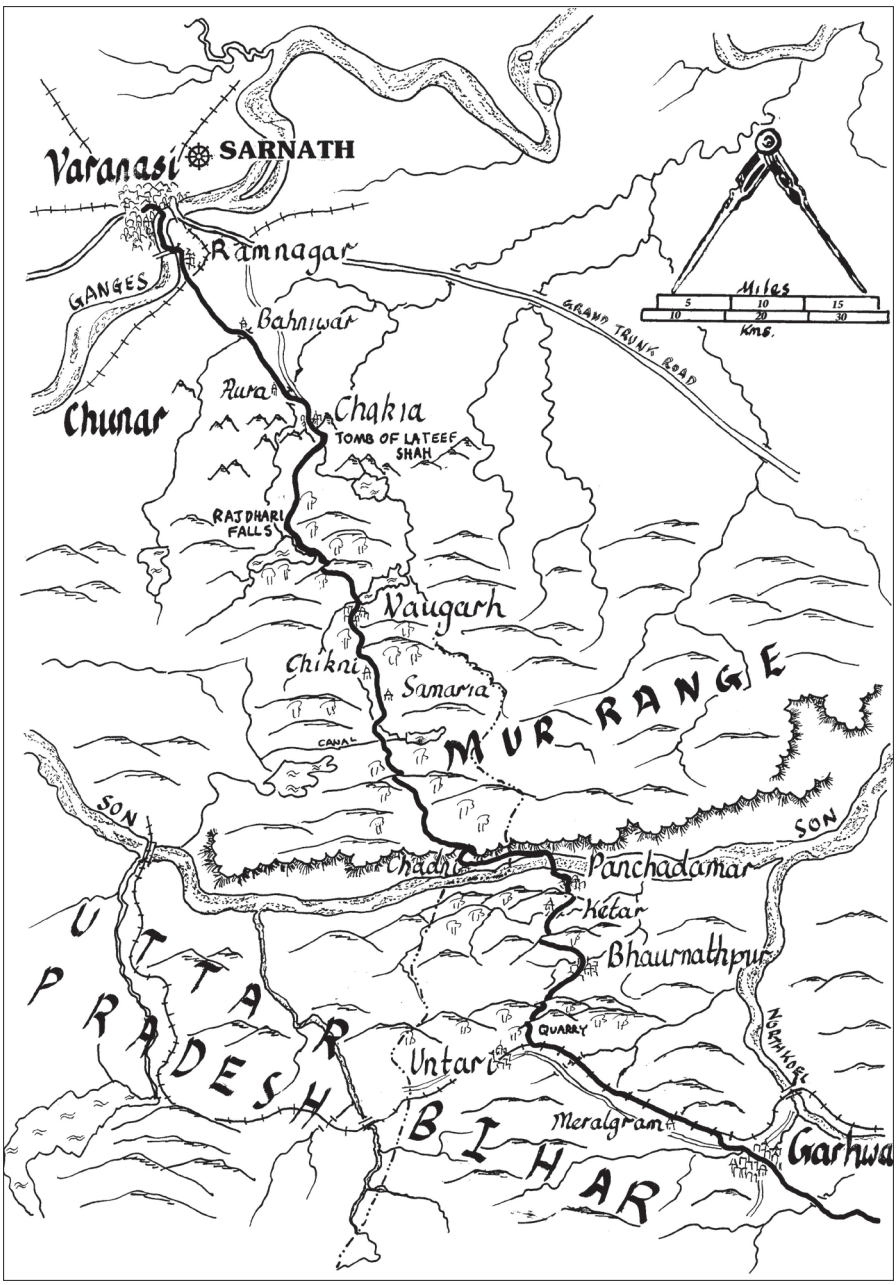
some weird way, we'd passed the test. Perhaps the next part of the pilgrimage, if we were allowed to do it, would be different—wiser, more compassionate—even the way a pilgrimage should be.


The Ganges Plain
N
HIMALAYA
DELHI
AGRA
KANPUR
LUCKNOW
AYODHYA
GORAKHPUR
Shravasti
Lumbini
RAPTI
Kapilavatthu
Kushinagar
Lauriya Nandangar
KATHMANDU
GANDAK
GHAGHARA
Vaishali
PATNA
YAMUNA
GANGES
ALLAHABAD
Kosambi
Sarnath
VARANASI
Nalanda
Rajgir
GAYA
Bodh Gaya
SON
CALCUTTA
BAY OF BENGAL
Principal Holy Places
Other Buddhist Sites
Modern Cities

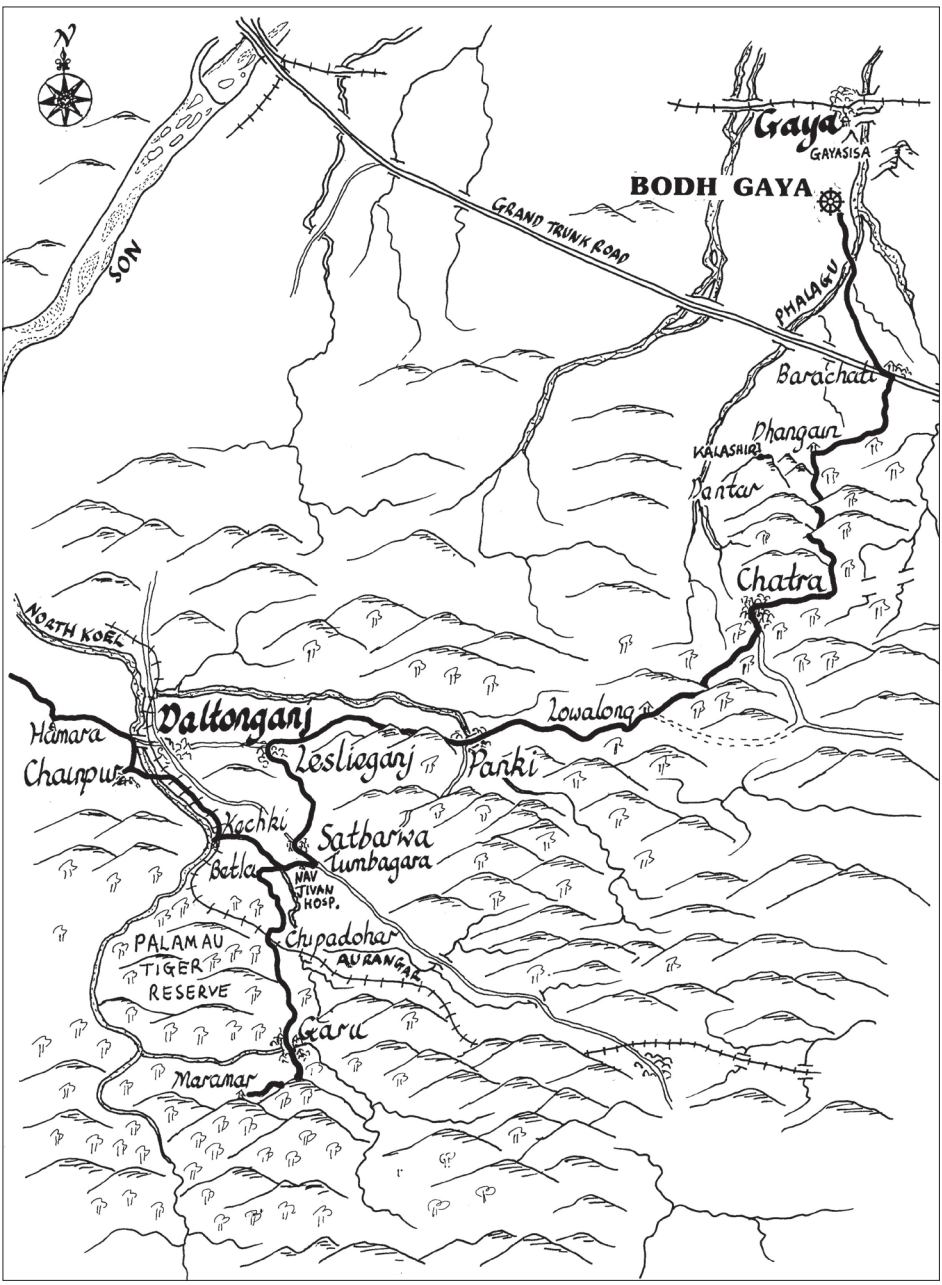
The Fourth Moon:

BODH GAYA TO VARANASI





Uttar Pradesh



and Southern Bihar



15

Home Again

AJAHN SUCITTO

It was night-time in Gaya, but things were still bustling. In the lighted shop fronts, father, mother, and a kid or two were still steadily at work—yet with bright and smiling faces. Time of day doesn't mean that much in India. What really counts is what you belong to. A home is optional, but family, clan, caste, (often entailing a traditional occupation) is something you don't leave. In fact you can belong to it for countless incarnations. This is the ethos that binds India together; it is the hard-wiring of duty, value, divine law—*dharma*. Tonight the web and weave looked happy enough—or maybe people just found the sight of us two comical: me in tatty brown robes, Nick with a scruffy blanket thrown round him. And as Nick moved into negotiations over purchasing the sticky sesame sweets that they were concocting, there were the usual questions as to how we fitted in: Where did we come from? And where were we going?

Well, pilgrimage was our *dharma*. And today this meant walking from Bodh Gaya to Gaya to catch the evening train to Calcutta—for the official business that our getting mugged two weeks previously necessitated. Thus our current duty was to report to the Deputy High Commission, fill in forms for new passports, re-apply for visas, and visit the

bank and the airline to negotiate for traveller's cheques and airline tickets. As Westerners, bits of official paper and noted numbers meant that wherever the two of us wandered, there was still a connection, meaning, a place on the planet. I shouldn't think the families here had any of that. Their *dharma*—in fact the role and occupation of every family in this district—was to pummel and beat a paste of ground-up seeds and sugar against the wall until it cohered into lumpy cakes. Well, a bag of these would be a something for the long train ride to Calcutta—it left at 9:30 in the evening and probably wouldn't get in until 7 or 8 in the morning.

We were travelling light—at least having all our belongings stolen had that advantage—and we'd even left behind the clothes and bits of traveller's gear that the Western Buddhist community in Bodh Gaya had given us when they had seen our plight. After two months in India one learns to adapt to life on the move. And also to what moving around entails: after the struggle through the thronging crowds at Gaya station, it was no longer surprising to find out that the train we were booked for was running four hours late. So we waited in the dull resignation that is the norm for seasoned travellers here, on the cold dark platform among the bodies wrapped in old blankets and newspaper.

It was night – it always seems to be night in Indian railway stations, as if darkness, cold, fatigue, boredom, and dirt are inseparable features of their world. So we wait, unable to afford the ten rupees each to get in the waiting room; we wait, energy falling like the thermometer, but holding out against sliding into the dirt of the floor by squatting on scraps of paper and propping ourselves against the wall. To lessen the discomfort, I descended as near as possible to the oblivion of sleep. Once or twice we'd get up to wander around the platforms and hang out with the *chai wallah* who lived here in this world of shades, contentedly making tea. He offered an experienced guess: "Calcutta train, no, this will not arrive before two-o'clock morning time"

Somewhere near 3:00 A.M. the Express pulled in, five and a half hours

late. This meant we wouldn't arrive in Calcutta before midday; which made the whole game plan a bit tight. Official businesses closed in late afternoon; but before noon we needed to get something to eat to fit in with my training rules; and finding a place and getting around in the teeming jumble of the city was no joke. Calcutta was the city of Mother Kali, goddess of Chaos. I felt my nerves tighten; but, clench and rage all you like, in India, there's nothing you can do but give up and wait.

And wait. The cold night opened into a long grey morning, with the train stopping at every station, and at nowheres between stations, and generally showing every sign of reluctance to reach its destination. ("Hurry, hurry, we're late!") It dawdled, slowed, sighed to long stops in the middle of the lush greenery of West Bengal, and it seemed to be only the almost imperceptible downhill gradient of the Ganges plain that kept it rolling eventually to a hissing halt in Howrah Station. By now we were late, late, late!! By now it was 3:15 P.M…the Deputy High Commission—somewhere in the centre of Calcutta, somewhere on the other side of the Howrah Bridge, the single bridge linking Calcutta on the east bank of the Hoogly River to the rest of India, somewhere through archaic arteries choked with cars, rickshaws, ox-carts, and people on two, one, or no legs, somewhere on the other side of impossibility—the Deputy High Commission would be closing at 4:00 precisely! In an air-conditioned establishment, officials in suits would glance up at a sedately ticking clock, sigh, shuffle their papers, lock their offices, and as we were seething and struggling through the labyrinths of the city, bid the doorman and the guards good evening and go…where to? Where would such beings lodge in Kali's city?

But as a goddess, Kali has her grandeur: the mutilated, the comic, the benevolent, the artistic, the utterly, homelessly, poor all find a place in Calcutta. And her surprises: today she was allowing us a miracle. Nick barged us through the station, out to the taxi rank "British High Commission!..No five-hundred rupees! Fifty rupees, OK?...No! OK hundred rupees? Bhante, get the bags in the boot!" – and we leapt over the Hoogly

and through the hordes to arrive at the gates and high white wall of the Deputy High Commission at 3:55 on the dot.

Armed Gurkhas at the gate; a tranquil garden and cool clean rooms; order like a refreshing pool. Her Majesty's servants were calm, efficient but not officious, and with friendly murmurs and quiet attention, showed not the slightest indication that it was at all unusual to be dealing with one of their own countrymen with a shaven head and robes while the other resembled an effigy of Guy Fawkes. They'd get to work on it straight away and should get things cleared in a few days. A cool clear *dharma*: ah, home again!

As we went out onto the streets of the city in a post-adrenaline vacuity, the intense psychodrama of inner India abated. And a spicy half-familiar world came flooding in—Park Street, Free School Street, Lenin Sarai, Chadni Chowk, and Chittaranjan Avenue—the street life, the shops, the buses, the old smoked buildings, all were of the style and bearing of the London of my childhood. When I was a boy, wandering around the streets of London was like this; being overwhelmed was just part of the magic. And in those days people were friendly like these people. A shopkeeper took the trouble to find the phone number of the Bengali Buddhist Association, call them up, and get exact directions to the *vihara*. Surprise, surprise! I didn't expect Calcutta to remind me of childhood innocence.

NICK

I had been through the business of getting traveller's cheques and passports replaced once before in India, with a friend in New Delhi, and knew how frustrating it could be. I knew there were many hurdles yet to be overcome, and one of them could well prove impossible. But that was not the only reason I approached Calcutta with such determination—ensuring we got to the British High Commission before it closed on the day we arrived, and then setting off first thing the next morning

from the Bengali Buddhist Association to the Indian bank that acted as the local agents for our cheques—in Calcutta I had the opportunity to take charge of my life again. Looking back, I can see that the determination to get things sorted was really about reasserting myself, becoming the efficient organiser, and so leaving behind that painful sense of a world out of control that had been our walk across the Ganges plain which had culminated in the awful robbery and its aftermath. I wanted to get back to the role where I felt at home.

The bank was in the heart of the commercial district, the part built by the British when Calcutta was still the capital of the Raj. It had since succumbed to India. The once-splendid Victorian stone buildings were blackened with grime, their eaves, balconies, and ledges were encrusted with a thick layer of bird droppings, and at their feet swarmed the human population of the most crowded city in the world. On one side of the once grand-portalled bank entrance was a rickety tea stall made of bamboo and plastic sheeting, on the other was one of the many families who live on the streets of Calcutta. They were just lying there on a few bits of dirty cloth, each looking more like a bundle of rags than a human being.

Inside the bank things were more orderly. There were rows of desks with studious-looking Bengali clerks and grilled counters with cashiers dealing with customers. I was directed to a foreign exchange desk where, to my surprise, they proved to be both efficient and helpful. Although the clerk had never refunded traveller's cheques before, he had all the relevant instructions to hand, and I left the bank only an hour later having been told to come back in a few days to see how they had got on.

It all seemed far too good to be true. Although I had been assured when buying the cheques in England that if they were stolen they would be replaced within one day of being reported, I knew that nothing ever happened that quickly in India. That had been demonstrated to me in Calcutta eighteen years before. My mother had sent me a parcel for

Christmas. Although I had warned her against sending anything to India by sea mail, she had checked with her local post office who had looked up India in their booklet and found that sea mail took three months. So my mother had sent the parcel in August, which was ample time, according to the conventions in England, for it to get to me for Christmas. Of course it had not arrived, even by the time I was about to leave India, six months later. So I went to the General Post Office and explained my problem. They were pessimistic about my chances of finding the parcel, but they sent me to a tall old building near the docks, with a Bengali clerk sitting behind a desk inside the entrance. Without much hope I explained what I was after.

"Your problems are over, your parcel is here."

"Great! Can I have it?"

"I am sorry, this is not possible. But, rest assured, certainly it is here. Upstairs there are so many mailbags, and your parcel is quite definitely in one of them."

It transpired that "so many" meant thousands of mailbags and that they opened and sorted about fifty a day. "So you must be patient, eventually we will certainly find it."

But I was leaving India the next day and did not get to see that parcel until it turned up at my mother's house two years later. The local postman was holding it at arm's length in a plastic bag. She had included a Christmas cake and chocolates, and the parcel was now dripping with weevils and maggots and stinking to high heaven. The only things salvageable were two paperback books, and they were badly stained and nibbled at the edges.

So I had learnt that things can take much longer in India than they reckon in England, and that is why from the bank I went to that same General Post Office to send a telegram to Ajahn Sucitto's monastery to ask them to help by contacting the bank in England. The post office had not changed at all since I had last been there. There were still the same old wooden fittings with barred grills at each of the counters, and

above each of them, a little red and white enamelled sign. Beneath the one marked "Telegrams" a clerk received my message. Beyond him was an ancient metal machine for sending the telegrams with various knobs and sockets and a manual keyboard. It must have been installed, like all the other fittings, by the British, and had been there ever since. I wondered if anything was ever replaced in India.

AJAHN SUCITTO

The *vihara* of the Bengali Buddhist Association was connected to the life of the city: the street it stood in was named after it. Bengal had Buddhists, and the large and well-established building, four storeys high, was there to serve them. And more than them: currently the *vihara* was sheltering a crowd of Thai fishermen (captured by the Indian authorities in the Andaman Islands and due to be repatriated) and two bhikkhus from Bangladesh, venerables Bhikkhu Bemal and Aggavamsa Mahathera. We'd come across Bhikkhu Bemal a few blocks away from the *vihara*, his broad face bursting into a smile of recognition: he remembered me from his visits to Amaravati where he'd come to publicise the atrocities being committed against the Buddhist hill tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Now he was here, finding a niche, and creating a school to help the children whose parents had managed to get out of Bangladesh.

Since Partition, Calcutta had received wave after wave of immigrants from Bangladesh, the eastern portion of what had originally been the province of Bengal. The Chittagong Hill Tracts had been a tribal territory, wedged up against the Burmese border. The people there were not Bengalis, they were Chakmas, looking more like Burmese or Nepalese. Moreover they were Buddhist, like some of the people of Assam; perhaps they represented traces of the last Buddhist empire, the Pala dynasty of the eighth and ninth centuries. Although the Hill Tracts had never been part of Bengal, the region was a victim of the mapmakers' convenience when it was carved up between Burma, India, and East

Pakistan. Of course at the time of the carve-up, the people's rights to their land and their culture were guaranteed—but all that was easily ignored; the demographic pressure from the plains and the difference of religion justified land-grabbing, military intrusion, war against the local resistance, the burning of villages, and massacres. Kali's city had received those who escaped.

The *vihara* itself was built in a square around a central courtyard; one edge of the square was lower than the rest and constituted the temple, the rest was accommodation and offices. The block that we were given a room in was deluxe accommodation for visiting dignitaries; it had been built quite recently. A dedication plaque proudly proclaimed that the foundation stone had been laid by Khambo Lama of Buriyat (that's a Russian republic adjacent to Mongolia). – with the building itself being inaugurated by Motoyuki Naganuma of Rissho Kosei Kai. Buriyat? And 'Motoyuki' sounded Japanese. What was the connection? And whose was the outline in wrought iron that decorated every window pane? Looked like a Tibetan monk of some kind….

And so it was. It turned out that the block was dedicated to the renowned Mahayana scholar Atisha. His work is not studied in Theravada, and nobody at the *vihara* had known of his existence until a few years ago when an invitation had come from Mongolia to attend the thousandth anniversary of the sage's birth. On reading the invitation, the association had discovered that Atisha—who had spent a major chunk of his teaching life in Tibet creating a systematic approach to the tantric and Mahayana teachings—was in fact a Bengali. So they felt duty-bound to go to the commemoration. Because of that meeting, Japanese sponsorship had come their way. And so they built the residence block. Hence Atisha's image decorated every window; honoured (but still not studied) by his own countrymen at last, the sage had finally returned to his native land.

Our host, Venerable Dhammapal, was as easy to sit around as a glowing hearth on a winter's night. He was most concerned for our wel-

fare. This in itself was not so unusual in India; what was different about him was his ability to size up the situation in practical terms, provide what was needed, and not overload us with the tedium of what was not needed. And he was interested in what we were doing. We'd have meals or tea with him and, after dealing with the practicalities, occasionally interrupted by his attending to sundry inquiries and phone calls, enjoy his lively conversation.

He had spent a long time in the order, having become a *samanera* just before the Second World War, and a bhikkhu in 1945. That had been in Cox's Bazaar, in the south of what is now Bangladesh. However, anticipating difficulties in being a Buddhist monk in a Muslim country, he had come to Calcutta in 1948. Being an immigrant from southern Bengal hadn't been easy; but he didn't go into details. Between 1962 and 1985, there had been a lot of internal wrangling within the Bengali Buddhist Association: "The problem is all Indians want to be their own boss! Indians just want to sit in the big chair and feel important—hey look at me!" But things had settled now; he had loyal and energetic assistants and quite a dynamic *vihara* that was connecting to people. Supporting schools, a clinic, and Dhamma teaching, it really was an association, a co-operative, and that was unusual.

For Venerable Dhammapal, one of the most challenging jobs was being chair of the All-India Bhikkhu Sangha, which was an attempt to create a self-regulating order of bhikkhus with standards of training, co-operation, and organisation. This was quite an aspiration. As we had seen in Kushinagar, men would become bhikkhus with little interest in undertaking the training. Many of them wandered off on their own within a few weeks of ordination to make a living by begging or performing rituals. Even here in the longest established *vihara* in India (founded in 1892) with good support and vitality, it was difficult to find any bhikkhu who would help to serve. Venerable Dhammapal was very impressed to hear of the number of monks and nuns training together in Britain, working for years to build residential centres out of dilapidated

buildings as well as meditating and teaching Dhamma. His assistants here were all lay people. "I've had to struggle my entire life," he commented more with a sense of affirmation than self-pity. He obviously had what it took to live with some integrity, and it had diminished neither his energy, nor his compassion, nor his humour.

There was another expatriate from the former East Bengal that we particularly wanted to see—Anagarika Munindra, the renowned meditation teacher. On our second day in Calcutta, we made a small pilgrimage to the headquarters of the Maha Bodhi Society in College Square where he was living. Nick remembered him from his first visit to India in the early 70s in Bodh Gaya, then as always clad in long loose white shirt and white baggy pants, and teaching with his gentle warmth.

For me the memory was of Anagaraka Munindra's visit to the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara in 1978. I had just arrived and, after my three years' solitary incarceration in a Thai monastery, being back in my birthplace and having people to talk to was pleasantly stimulating. For the other bhikkhus, who were used to living in the forest, life cooped up in a London town house felt dour. The place had a stale mood, like a neglected menagerie. Then Anagarika Munindra turned up, as bright as the song of some gorgeous tropical bird, and everybody began to cheer up under the influence of his warmth.

Twelve years later it was we who were the migrants, tapping on the door of his little room in the Maha Bodhi Society headquarters. Still immaculately clad, he looked more time-worn now and was just getting over an illness. But to see us was nothing but a delight. His little nest was plain—a bed with a mosquito net over it and a straight-backed chair were the only furnishings; a thermos flask, paraffin stove, and simple cooking utensils the only accoutrements. After he had greeted us and had settled me in the chair, he continued shucking peas into a saucepan as he talked.

For many years he had been an *anagarika*—one who has "left home" and avowed celibacy in order to follow a spiritual path. He had been a

bhikkhu once, and spent ten years in Burma, but he disrobed as it was too difficult to get by in India. As an anagarika, being allowed to use money and cook for himself, he had more freedom to travel and teach. At one time he had been superintendent of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya and established the International Meditation Centre there; he then travelled to the West, bringing practical meditation instruction across with his gentleness and his Bengali charm. But now at the age of 75, he had returned to his native Bengal to stay at the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta and teach retreats there.

He offered us some of his peas and some fruit. And he even had a copy of Forest Sangha Newsletter, the quarterly periodical from Amaravati that I used to edit! I roved through it hungrily, reading the familiar names, and of events in a distant home-land—with the typographical errors leaping off the page. Home was not so much a place; it was the compound of familiarity, nagging concerns, partial achievements, plans—everything that added density and importance to one's existence. Now it seemed like the glittering bric-a-brac in a magpie's nest. Home: a set-up that you could call your own in which to create an apparent order out of chaos, a place where you could plan your life—all so reasonable. To be truly homeless pitted you against your very identity. No wonder even the old meditation teacher, having chosen a role and an occupation, eventually gravitated back to his birth-place.

We were doing much the same, going back to our nice little room in the *vihara*—with a door that you could shut, a room free from intrusion! We could go out and look at Calcutta, do our errands, and then get back to the *vihara*—and close that door. Around that door the myth of separateness, and then of having other places to go out to, could develop. Behind the door you could assume a different role at will; you could cut off the input and "be yourself." The effect was quite dramatic after the raw exposure of wandering across the plains of Bihar—life was now something I could witness, and withdraw from, at will. I began to feel quietly happy.

NICK

Ven. Dhammapal offered his car and driver to get us about Calcutta. It was an Ambassador; it had to be really, as nearly every car in India was an Ambassador then. They were made there to the design of a British 1957 Morris Oxford, and had been since the 1960s. As they had never been updated; all that varied was how old they were—India had found the archetypal car and stuck with it. The temple's archetype was kept in the compound where the driver tended it with loving care, washing it every day and always poking about under the bonnet. Being driven around Calcutta was very grand, but the congested streets of the city centre made it a bit pointless for local errands. So we only used it for the two trips we made together to the embassies in the suburbs; the rest of the time I would usually walk.

I enjoyed wandering through Calcutta. The temple was not more than half an hour from most places I needed to visit, and I developed a number of standard routes cutting through side streets and down different thoroughfares. Each section of the city had its own character, and it would change with every corner I turned. Perhaps it was a commercial area specialising in certain goods—all the shops and the street hawkers dealing in brassware or marble or vehicle parts, while fellow workers made the things for sale in the back or repaired the cars or motorbikes in the street. If the area was residential, its character would be defined by the residents; everyone would be Muslims with long shirts, baggy trousers, and those beards without moustaches that look stuck on, or they would be from somewhere like Bihar or Assam and wearing their distinctive local costume. Then there were the different public buildings with their attendant trades—the rows of scribes and typists squatting over their manual typewriters on the pavement outside the law courts; the brokers, sitting in open-sided cubicles piled three high shouting their offers next to the stock market; and outside each of the good hotels, the beggars, shoeshine boys, and touts who would all pester me as I went

by. Each district had one thing in common, though—it would be seething with humans.

If I had further to go I would take one of the buses or trams. One has to develop new skills to travel on public transport in Calcutta. All the vehicles are constantly packed full and usually only stop to let people off. To get on you make a run at a bus when it is forced to stop, at traffic lights or when people are getting off, and cram yourself onto the running board, accepting the helping arms that come out of the squash of people already there. You then squeeze your way farther in and stand in a packed mass until you arrive at your destination. Occasionally you meet a conductor to pay your fare to; only once did I manage to get a seat.

The trams are much the same as the buses, except while the buses run out to the suburbs down wide avenues, the trams run through the centre of the city along the most crowded of streets. There they are forced to go so slowly that everyone gets on and off, or attempts to, while they are moving, and they dispense entirely with the need for stops. These ancient grey battered metal boxes, which long ago lost their paintwork, lurch and squeal as they try to make their way, seemingly against the tide. They are at a perpetual disadvantage, unable to leave their rails to wind their way around obstacles as everything else on the street can: the lorries, the cars, the distinctive yellow and black taxis (Ambassadors of course, driven by Sikhs), the rickshaws and carts pulled by sweating coolies (animals and cycle rickshaws being banned in the city centre to cut down on congestion), and the pedestrians who are forced to walk on the road as the pavement is filled with the shops that have spilled out on to them and by the hawkers lining the kerbs.

To begin with, my trips were just to the bank to see if our money had arrived. When after only three days, to my surprise, it did, I could start, with a growing sense of hope, to assemble other needs of our pilgrimage. I went to the airline offices to replace our tickets and to various shops to buy things like a travel clock, straps for my bag, and new maps. But we still had no passports, and no visas.

I could also buy some of the things that I had been passing and wanting for the past week: small treats like a *Time* magazine, some local sweets, and a book from the second-hand bookstore for Ajahn Sucitto. We had browsed there together one afternoon, and I knew he wanted to read Geoffrey Moorhouse's book on Calcutta.

My money was tight and I had to be careful. I had come to India with the bare minimum, and even though the traveller's cheques were now replaced, there was still the cash I had lost and the charges for replacing passports, visas, and air tickets. We were going to be very poor for the rest of the journey. However, there was one other thing that I was finding hard to resist. In one of the antique shops near to the big hotels, most of the window was filled with large bronze and ivory figures, but down at the front, sitting on its own in one corner, was a small, and slightly wonky-looking, Buddha *rupa*. The shop-keeper told me it was Cambodian and two hundred years old. I realised, it being Calcutta, that may not have been true, but it seemed a strange coincidence that the one Ajahn Sucitto had been carrying before the robbery had also been two hundred years old and a gift from the chairman of the Cambodia Trust. Furthermore this *rupa's* rather sad and slightly beaten-up look seemed so suitable for Ajahn Sucitto. I would stop to look at it whenever I went by—but if I bought it, it would now cost two weeks' worth of our remaining money.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Safe in my nest I got into the book on Calcutta that Nick had bought me.

Somewhere in this urban mass three hundred years ago had stood Kalikata, a village dedicated to Kali. Then the English had come—the merchants of the East India Company—and owing to the favours of the emperors Shah Jehan and Aurangzeb, settled on this swampy riverbank. Cunning traders, more or less compelled by the Company's low wages to underhanded dealing, they added warehouses and a fort to the village;

poor housing grew up for the employees, and Calcutta was born. The Company siphoned off the wealth of Bengal through Calcutta. Kali's town became a great trading city: after the Mutiny in 1857 and the abolition of the Company, having been married to the Empire, she became the capital of British India, the viceroy's seat, a city second only to London in the Empire and ruled by a virtual monarch. But Kali's *dharma* is destruction: she had celebrated the death of the Raj here, and still here in this place of the Asiatic Society and Rabindranath Tagore were the most violent Hindu-Muslim riots after Independence, the Naxalite (Maoist) terrorist attacks on landowners, the Bangladesh war of independence, and always, wave after wave of refugees, more than a million homeless immigrants sluicing down, uncontainable as the May monsoons. The rising tide of destitute humans carried with it an uncontrollable flood of sewage and disease. A city of great warmth, grandeur, squalor, and violence, with a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for human misery—and somehow accepting, even embracing, it all.

Reading about India and seeing it in historical perspective had the effect of granting me a kind of psychological advantage over it. A city built by men—English men, at that. Of course, we were just skimming like privileged boatmen across its surface, and able to dip into some of its pleasant backwaters during our excursions. While Nick went around the city on errands, I spent a few hours in the library of the British Council reading newspapers, for no good reason except to soak up the atmosphere: not just the air-conditioning and the comfortable chairs, but the whole Western ethic that allows you to stand back from circumstances, choose what you wish to attend to (generally something refined or stimulating), and drift in that at your leisure. Ah…the privilege of contemplating the agonies of the world from a place of security and analysis. The "at-home" feeling was attractive…but strange…dishonest even—like stealing apples. I wondered how long I would get away with it before the owner of the garden showed up.

With some misgivings, I picked up the diary habit again. In Bodh

Gaya I had scribbled down the briefest day-to-day outline of the pilgrimage: one-liners to replace the copious notes that had disappeared with the robbery, and such names and fragments that I could remember. Meeting Sister Thanissara there had reminded me of my connections, responsibilities even, to the Sangha, and the promise to keep a record. In Calcutta, Nick purchased a new diary, a tiny two-volume Hindi-English dictionary, and some maps. So our pilgrims' raft was set afloat again complete with navigation equipment and log. Order was looming.

The final impudence was the Chinese restaurant. On a long sortie, we went into a restaurant for a meal; by Western standards it was nothing special. But in terms of pilgrim's *dharma*, the place was a betrayal: neat tables with clean white tablecloths and chairs set around them, wallpaper on the walls, and a waiter who you didn't have to hunt down, complete with menus. Gleaming cutlery was neatly lined up to attend the chairs, and the centre of the crisp white cloth was picked out with a deep crimson rose. I ate hot chop suey with some kind of sauce on it and washed it down with glasses of water from the sparkling carafe on the table.

The water, of course the water! It's always the casual bite on the proffered fruit, or the complacent sip from the poisoned chalice! Nick didn't drink any; so I alone received the Goddess' revenge, a mild one by her standards. Most of the third night in Calcutta I was in the lavatory adjoining our room having my innards wrung out. A kind of purgation: when there's no solid or liquid matter that can be squeezed out of either end of your body, and the retching is about to throw your eyeballs down the hole, you know it's your controlling mind she's after. Out came the tablecloth and the rose, and the armchairs in the library, Geoffrey Moorhouse's book, and the newspaper reports about other places. Repent, pilgrim! Get back to nowhere! Down the hole went London and the Deputy High Commission, and Amaravati—every last stolen apple. There's something reassuringly simple about Kali: she doesn't confuse you with stuff like justice and inscrutable divine plan and loving you despite it all; she is very straight: you, as a three-dimensional being with

a past having interesting qualities and friends and all that solid junk, are here to be destroyed. She takes a personal interest in it. Simple. That's my kind of goddess.

I became fond of that little room after a few hours; you could let go with complete ease. It was by far the best lavatory we had come across, clean, with a tiled floor, a flush toilet, taps that worked, and a door that closed. As I lay sweating and shuddering on the cool floor between spasms, gentle waves of gratitude to Atisha shimmered through my heaving fog. I was in the right place. Chaos creates its own order.

NICK

My passport was replaced within a week, and the consulate said Ajahn Sucitto's would follow the next day. It really did seem the pilgrimage might get under way again. Getting the Nepalese visa replaced also proved no problem. At their embassy, on a street in the better suburbs of Calcutta, the small smiling men of Nepal were content with a letter from our Deputy High Commission, embossed with an imposing gold British crown, saying our passports had been stolen and would they be so kind as to replace the visas. Mine was done in less than a day. But there was still the Indian visas.

To get them replaced I had to go to the Indian police section dealing with immigrants. This was based in an old rambling colonial house also in the suburbs and was filled with a chaotic assortment of desks both covered and surrounded with piles of official papers. The place had a foreboding listlessness about it, with several dejected-looking Westerners already waiting to have their visas renewed. The visas were the responsibility of a big and surprisingly jovial police officer ensconced behind a desk so piled with papers that when it was finally my turn to sit opposite him, I could see him only from the lapels up. He explained that replacing the visas would take a while, as he would have to contact New Delhi. I asked how long? "Three weeks, maybe four. These chaps

can take their time." We were stuck; we needed the visas to get out of the country. I asked what could I do? He just shrugged and looked helpless. I tried a few suggestions but none of them were any good, they just made the policeman lose more of his good humour. As I got up to leave, my heart sinking at the idea of god knows how many weeks of coming to this office to enquire about visas, I had another idea. Could I get our visas replaced in Benares when we got there? He visibly perked up, "Why not?" So that is what we decided to do.

I did not quite trust that answer, but I was willing to risk it even though I had been warned by one of the waiting Westerners that if we turned up at the Nepal border without visas they would never let us out but send us instead to New Delhi. This way, at least we could get on with the pilgrimage.

So we decided that I would wait on in Calcutta to collect Ajahn Sucitto's Nepalese visa while he returned to Bodh Gaya. The Indian visas would have to wait.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Being laid out with sickness had a peaceful domesticity to it. Nothing much to do. A little sewing perhaps? So when I made it back into the bedroom, between dozing and vomiting, I started working on a sitting cloth to squat on when we got back to country life. The one I bought from England had disappeared one dawn on the road; the one I'd subsequently made from nylon had been stolen. The homespun cloth that Nick bought in Calcutta's *khadi* emporium was as earthy as India. It felt right at last. I cut it up as best I could with tiny nail scissors and cobbled the strips together with wavering stitches.

Bhante had special food sent up to me and arranged for me to visit the *vihara*'s free clinic when I was strong enough to stand. The next day, it was his turn: laid up, nursing a tooth extraction. My stomach had settled by then, and when he mentioned that he was supposed to go to teach

in a school in a Buddhist suburb called Gotampur in the afternoon, it seemed like a golden opportunity to respond with some of the kindness that he had showed us. Nick and I would go in his place. The car would take us with another monk to help out. After that we'd return to the *vihara*, and I would take the train back to Gaya while Nick stayed on to conclude our business in Calcutta. I was looking forward to attending Christopher Titmuss' meditation retreat in the Thai temple; the retreat was due to begin on the next evening, and it would be a courtesy to the resident monks to spend a day with them before the retreat began.

It was also a treat to myself to be in a situation that I was familiar with. The visit to the school was a kind of prelude – a chance to be a Buddhist monk teaching Dhamma to Buddhists. The Gotampur assembly of young teenagers was rapt and responsive.They all knew their Buddhist catechisms, and at the end of the lesson, they all proffered their exercise books for our autographs. Then one of the eldest girls gave a speech: "…to express our deep gratitude for your profound teachings and esteemed presence, and we humbly wish that you will honour us with a visitation in the future." One of the teachers escorted us around the village, the sun was shining, we were carrying flowers from the children, and Buddhist Bengal seemed such a haven for my identity. Fortunately, I couldn't hang on to it.

Because then it was back to Bihar as an estranged wanderer on another long train ride on another cold night. Nick, went with me to Howrah, and seeing me off, pressed a small bar of plain chocolate into my hand. My guts grumbled and rolled menacingly. I unswung a sleeping platform and took up my position for the night. No passport, no visa, no money; just a small shoulder bag with a toothbrush, a diary I wasn't up to writing in, a book I didn't want to read—and a little bar of chocolate in my hand that I didn't feel inclined to eat. The stale half-lit atmosphere muttered to whatever grumbled inside me, as, occasionally chanting the Three Refuges for comfort, I let the darkness meet and merge with my own.…

Dawn. "Love for all, great and small," said the sign on a platform somewhere as we were nearing Gaya. Oh well. Time to move. I got up, gingerly lowered myself—guts in hand—from the carriage and made my way as best I could via the footbridge across the tracks towards the exit. On the platform as I descended, there were Sister Thanissara and Nada, waiting for the train to Varanasi—which had been fittingly delayed. Their faces paled at seeing me. They were going home; but it wasn't a time for a lot of dialogue. I fumbled at putting a few words together; they clucked and bustled around getting me back to Bodh Gaya.

Outside the station were the rickshaw drivers. I didn't want a rickshaw, but I gave up. Nada was explaining to the rickshaw *wallah* as she placed rupee bills in his hand—"This is to take the monk to the bus to Bodh Gaya, O.K.? This is rupees for the bus ticket, O.K.? This is *baksheesh* for you, O.K.?" He had an unmoving expression. "Understand? O.K.?" *"Ahchaah."*

He was going to rip her off; that was obvious. Still I had my work cut out keeping my guts under control. I dumped myself in the back of the rickshaw and stayed centred. After a while, we came across a bus parked half on the pavement half in the road. The rickshaw *wallah* stopped, but I had enough savvy to stay close by him as we went to the bus…the tyre on one of the back wheels was off; there was just the driver and his assistant standing around. "Bodh Gaya, O.K." said my rickshaw driver and put my bag inside the bus making to leave. Not so fast—this bus wasn't going anywhere…and what about the fare! I caught his hand and snarled at him as I snatched the money out of it. He looked surly but thought better of it and cycled off.

"Bodh Gaya? Bodh Gaya?" I waggled the words and a few rupee bills at the pair by the back wheel. They shrugged. A scooter taxi turned up; they piled me in the back amongst some packets of sliced bread, took the rupees out of my hand, and we drove off. India. Home again.

NICK

This was the first time we had been apart for more than a few hours since we came to India, and it felt like I had weekend leave from some institution of confinement. I had little money to spend, and there wasn't really much I particularly wanted to do, but still I felt really excited. For months we had been more together than a married couple. We might not have slept in the same bed, but we had always slept in the same room or on the same bit of ground, and we had spent nearly every day entirely together. It was as if we were in some kind of surreal three-legged race, strapped to a partner with a different length of stride. Being English and male we hadn't even discussed it, just struggled along. So it felt great to be able to go off and do whatever I wanted to do, to be me again. I gave up *pujas* and meditation and in the evenings sat with my feet up drinking tea with milk in it and reading newspapers, or poring over the new maps I had. And I bought myself a few treats to have in the morning, like a slice of chocolate cake from the bakers' I had been eyeing up for days.

I had got the maps just before Ajahn Sucitto left. I had been to all the bookshops and market places but only found cheap crude ones that would be of little use. I longed for something as detailed and reliable as the copies of the old 1940s maps that the robbers had chopped up like salami. In one of the bookshops I fondly showed the few remnants I still had to the manager, not so much with any hope of getting them replaced but to let him see why I was not happy with the map he was offering me. "Then you must go to the office of the Surveyor General; it is here in Calcutta." I should have known that if the British had set something up, it would still be here somewhere.

The offices were behind a high wall that ran the full length of a street not that far from the bookshop. Two soldiers guarded the gateway, where a clerk issued me a chittee. I then crossed a compound to a large Victorian building, climbed a flight of stone steps, and went in through the open double doors. Just inside a very small sign in English said "Map

Sales" and an arrow pointed to an office with another clerk behind a wide table who was dealing with just one customer. He was unrolling maps just like the ones I had copied in England.

I got all the maps I needed from that office except the one for the area adjacent to the Nepalese border, which was marked on the catalogue as "military secret." They were more recent editions than the ones I had copied in England—some had been updated only a few years before—and they were in colour. But what I found amazing was that the maps in the market place were nowhere near as good as these and were more expensive, but they were all that most people in India knew about. That office was one of only four in all of India where they could be purchased, and there was just one other customer while I was there. We travelled with those government maps for the rest of our journey, and everyone we showed them to was astounded by their excellence, even police officers and forest rangers!

It took only two days for the sense of excitement at being able to do whatever I liked to wear off. I could have stayed longer, but once I had Ajahn Sucitto's visa for Nepal I decided to follow him. Not, though, without first going to the antique shop to buy that Cambodian Buddha as a present for him. He deserved it, and maybe we couldn't afford it, but we would just have to be even poorer.

Then I was rumbling west on the train to Gaya. I had started to miss him, and it would be good to meet up again.



16

Saints, Monks, and Sages

AJAHN SUCITTO

I'd just broken the rule about not handling money; now I was being bounced along the rutted road to Bodh Gaya, curled on my back with my feet braced against the side of the cab to keep my guts under control. Something says that there must be a better way than this to enter the place of the Buddha.

The shaking stopped. Peering out of my churn, I realised that I had come to earth near the market in Bodh Gaya. It was time to get out, to gather the energy and connect to the scrambled body elements, untangle the legs, and attempt the vertical. I got my feet firmly planted onto the dust of the road and managed a careful ascent. A stable world appeared, right side up, and there was Thomas.

Thomas—quiet, careful Thomas. He invited me to have breakfast with him. We went to one of the tents near the Tibetan monastery and had good Tibetan tea and good Tibetan bread. Thomas was one of the Westerners I had met at the Burmese Vihara; he gave the impression of someone who'd been to India many times and had found a way of staying centred in it. He was one of the managers for the forthcoming Christopher Titmuss retreat at the Thai temple, making the practical arrangements of food and hiring cooks. Assisted by the even stress of

his German accent, Thomas always spoke calmly. He managed to get things done, slowly, according to the stop-go, two-steps-forward, one-step-back movement of India. He'd been doing it for years as an act of service to the Dhamma and to Christopher's teachings. It was divine service; managing retreats for Westerners in India—and therefore being the contact between two powerful and contradictory mind-sets—must have worn out every flint of impatience. A sharpness was still there, but any fire had cooled into a reflective clarity. His quiet openness and interest in other teachings spoke of an unforced confidence in the path he was following. Such are the marks of a *vipassana* saint.

When I was going on alms round during the previous stay at Bodh Gaya, Thomas would materialise from time to time to place a few cakes or some bananas in my bowl and disappear with a smile. He saw a need and responded without fuss. One time, talking over tea, he had offered to cover the costs of having a new bag made for me by a local tailor; meeting him again reminded me that it should be ready soon. But over buttered tea and bread, my spirits rose above such things, and our conversation ascended to an inquiry into the relative values of *vipassana*, or insight meditation, compared with the more devotional approaches of traditional Indian gurus. This was sparked off by the number of Andrew Cohen disciples who were in town; in many cases these were people who had practised insight for some years but now were attracted to what Andrew represented. Thomas had, of course, listened to Andrew, but had not been that impressed. However, he had stayed for a while with Andrew's former teacher, Poonja-ji, in Lucknow and been very moved by the Indian teacher's loving radiance. Joy-starved Western seekers were now making their way to Lucknow to see the Guru. Thomas gave me the address and a little map of how to get there, should I be interested. "Why not?" I thought: the spirit of devotion had helped make my own spiritual practice less abstract. And, although I was wary of gurus, one holy man in this crazy trip was hardly going to spoil the integrity of the pilgrimage.

Then it was time to move on. Thomas' keen expression relaxed back to the trace of a smile as he moved off into the crowded street and went about his business, quietly. I made my own way slowly over to Wat Thai, where Christopher's retreat would be beginning. I was looking forward to participating, to sitting calmly in silence and focusing on the here and now of the mind.

Insight meditation—that was how I started on this journey. Meditation required a quality of calm that was best induced by sitting still and collecting the mind's attention on the breath or feelings in the body. That took a while, but got easier over the years. "Insight" then operates within that, by objectively noticing the phenomena that appear within the mind's focus: body twinges, moods, patterns of memory, planning for the future, ideals, and joys as well as grudges—even dullness. With insight practice, a meditator could witness the phantoms of stress that haunt the heart as transitory and impersonal. So there was dispassion and awareness where there had been compulsion, and compassion where there had been prejudice. That was the spring out of which, rather to my surprise, my practice as a bhikkhu had arisen.

Being on the road in India all these years later, however, was a major challenge to sustaining any perspectives. It wasn't just the hardship; hardship can be recognised and compensated for, even used to support personal determination. It was the deepening sense of estrangement. A lot of something was going on, but there were no notebooks available in Mother Kali's academy. The teaching was so direct it was visceral. My heart would brace itself to resist the chafing of irritations and then receive a shower of benevolence that highlighted those uptight attitudes—and their numbing effect. But whatever hard skin formed over the heart, things got under it and into the tender places and the rawness. So the tranquillity and reason of the retreat, and above all its familiarity, felt like balm; here I could be 'Me' again. After all this being bounced around, it was high time to get my feet back on the ground—to re-centre and review.

Christopher greeted me warmly with a few words of Thai and his hands in *anjali* when I wandered around the section of the Wat that would accommodate the retreat. He'd been a bhikkhu in Thailand for about six years, and his connection to the Thai *sangha*, as well as the strong association with the Buddha that Bodh Gaya obviously conveyed, were among the reasons for his having held a retreat here every year since disrobing in 1976. However, his teaching didn't indicate such an underlying feeling for tradition. His approach was antipathetic to ritual and used questions and dialogue to heighten inquiry. "Free-thinking," "the spirit of inquiry," and "engaged" were the catch-phrases that one associated with Christopher; in fact he rejected such terms as *Buddhist* and even *meditation* as being too loaded with outdated values. But though I might have seemed out of place amongst the ragged bunch of Westerners who were already moving in with gypsy determination, he welcomed me to take part.

I was something strange to the Thai monks also. They were nervously polite when I appeared in the bhikkhus' section and settled on accommodating me in a room with Phra Apichat, one of the resident monks; but there would be no room for Nick. Perhaps the many vacant rooms of the Wat were being reserved for the Thai tour groups who were the raison d'être of the monastery. I wasn't about to argue; there were question marks hanging over every event on this trip. In fact the strangeness was acquiring a sacred quality. Where everyone feels themselves to be a stranger, contradictions can co-exist: a Thai monastery established on Thai custom and ritual as the expression of Buddhism could accommodate a Western retreat whose ideology was almost diametrically opposed to its own. And not quite belonging to either side, I could be accepted as a guest by both. Strangeness is a sanctuary.

Slowly, I moved in. No, I didn't want to eat the meal; the Goddess was turning in my stomach. However, she would surely have approved of Phra Apichat's room. It was a shrine to chaos: Buddha images in bronze coated with dust, and statuettes of revered bhikkhus hunched

over in the curved spine posture that Western meditators despise as a slump—those were the principal icons, some of them trailing tatters of gold leaf like vestiges of devotion. They nestled as best they could on the uneven piles of robes from Thailand, many still in their cellophane wrappers, and blankets and cushions jumbled wherever they had been set down. Large fans used during blessing ceremonies might once have stood upright but now lounged in any available niche, wedged into the strata of books and magazines, calendars and posters depicting the Thai royal family; with the jars of aromatic balm, bottles of bright pink medicine, and packs of pills, they offered protection from all the pains of existence. Brass dishes overlaid with the begrimed magma of long-extinct candles and wrapped in coils of *mala* beads represented the contemplative aspect of the faith. The entirety was lavishly garlanded with skeins of sooty cobwebs. There was room for me here, I was assured, as I unearthed a simple plank bed. For my part, I struggled through some disjointed conversation with Apichat (who seemed a little strange) and began counting the hours till I could get out and over to the retreat.

The retreat blazed outside with youthful ardour. Along the verandas that ran around the meditation hall, people had pitched their mosquito nets and bedding on bales of rice straw. Never mind the rain that began to patter down and be gusted under the overhanging roof; the eagerness repelled the shower as easily as a hotplate. There was a packed audience of nearly a hundred Westerners in the room for Christopher's introductory talk. The veterans were eclectic seekers who'd read or seen Krishnamurti and Chögyam Trungpa and sat with *vipassana* saints like Munindra-ji, Goenka-ji, Joseph Goldstein, or Christina Feldman. Many had done several retreats before with Christopher. With blankets draped around their shoulders against the damp January night, they were settled in half- or full-lotus posture on special meditation cushions, or squatting astride meditation stools that support an upright sitting posture. Although some of the retreatants were garlanded with beads or other *materia Indica* as indications of their familiarity with the East, the

room was unadorned—a *vipassana* workplace—no candles, incense, or shrine. Or even chairs: the comparative newcomers were trying to get more comfortable by propping themselves against the walls.

Christopher's opening talk was reassuring. Although it was mostly about maintaining silence and not smoking because of the fire risk, even this was delivered with a sense of earnestness that was invigorating. Here was reason; here was the opportunity to work towards a goal that was definable and life-enhancing—clarity, living in harmony with oneself and others—plus a good taste of something wonderful. All delivered in a crisp British accent with its surging stress that underlined each truth before tailing off into understatement, throw-away remarks, and gentle self-mockery. His body bobbed up and down to the rhythm of his speech; with that motion helping to pump them out, even simple instructions acquired a driving sincerity. Saint Christopher—faithful guide to those on the path. I could feel my mind firm up.

Things continued to flow along nicely. That very evening, Katie, who was helping to manage the retreat, offered me Ayurvedic medicine, and the sickness abated (the way it should do). Then Nick arrived triumphant from Calcutta on the afternoon of the retreat's second full day. He had got all the documents—passport, visas, airline tickets—and was in good spirits. "I've got something for you, Bhante," he said with a particular shine in his face, and pulled out of his bag some small object. His hands opened to reveal—a Buddha image! Or at least it looked like a Buddha… or was it some Buddhist angel, some *deva*? Or maybe it was a *yakkha*, one of the demonic spirits (who could be friendly if treated in the right way) that peer into the Buddhist world from the fringes of its cosmology.

I'd never seen anything quite like it. For a start, apart from the obvious feature of a head, the shape was an indeterminate blob that approximated to a body sitting in the meditation posture, with a vague suggestion of arms resting in its lap. The head tapered upwards into a spike, presumably either a head-dress or a flame symbolising its aura. That was not so odd as the way that the spike was tilted in a rakish angle

to the right, giving the figure a slightly drunken or battered feel, which was echoed by the face. What a face! Again not very clearly defined: two puffy half-closed eyes that looked almost sinister, a nose squashed in like a prize-fighter's, but with a great triumphant smile beaming out of the crude dark metal. This was a totem of survival! I turned him over in my hand. What an icon—I'd never come across an image that felt so much like myself! It had probably been cast in bronze, but so crudely that flakes and gritty lumps roughened the surface. He was unpolishable, and therefore perfect. Whether he was part demon, part angel, bodhisattva, or whatever, he was Buddha to me, and I was delighted.

"His name," I told Nick, "is Maha Khanti: the Great Patient One, the One Who Endures Much." Something in my mind shivered in recognition: an image of this pilgrimage. But we laughed.

NICK

The first I knew about Andrew Cohen coming was when I met a girl sitting in a tea shop outside the Burmese Vihara the day before we had left for Calcutta. During the last few days of that visit to Bodh Gaya I had noticed groups of Westerners wearing bright Californian colours and bright Californian smiles, and it had occurred to me that they had not been there before, but I had not realised the reason. The girl was sitting at my table and looking a bit lost, so I got talking to her. She explained that she had come to to see Andrew, that she had been a follower of his but had become disillusioned because of the problems it had caused to the relationship with her partner and her parents. That was a year back, and since then she had been having second thoughts. She was here to see Andrew again to see what effect that would have. She seemed a slightly pathetic creature, very unlike the vibrant followers I had been seeing around Bodh Gaya. She explained that they were the forward scouts sent on ahead to rent a couple of houses, one for Andrew to stay in and the other for the followers travelling with him.

I had already heard a lot about Andrew Cohen. He had been a disciple of several Indian gurus and a student in the *vipassana* movement for which Christopher Titmuss was one of the teachers. He then had an experience of awakening while with Shri Poonja-ji, and it was that which led him to become a guru. Many of the initial followers who collected around him were other *vipassana* meditators, and from then on he went out of his way to recruit more of them, causing a lot of consternation in the *vipassana* movement. The retreat organisers thought it was more than coincidence that he was due to arrive in Bodh Gaya just two days before the retreat started. He would have known Christopher's annual retreats attracted a couple hundred participants.

On my return from Calcutta I found it amusing to spot the divergent groups of Westerners. The *vipassana* students were serious looking, and either on their own or in twos or threes, Andrew Cohen's followers were in large groups and full of laughter. Amongst them I spotted the girl I had met; she was now happy and relaxed, and even seemed to be wearing brighter clothes.

By then Andrew Cohen was holding *satsang* in the front room of the house they had rented for him. This is an Indian tradition where just having an audience with a spiritual teacher is believed to have a great benefit for the followers. Andrew Cohen used the *satsangs* to dialogue, particularly with anyone new to the meetings. I suggested that we went along to an evening session, just to see what he was doing, but Ajahn Sucitto felt it inappropriate. It would be different if he were going out of interest in the teaching but not just to watch as a spectator. So I let the idea go. But I did get to meet Andrew Cohen a year later at a Buddhist monastery in New Zealand. His followers had arranged for him to visit in the hope that he could dialogue with the abbot in front of an audience of the local supporters. The abbot had other ideas, however, and Andrew got to meet just a group of monks and the two of us laymen staying there.

I found Andrew a fascinating character. He had obviously had a profound spiritual insight, and he was charming, eloquent, and persuasive in talking about it. I was impressed with the dialogue. That is until one of the monks asked some questions of his followers. There were seven of them there, six of whom were women, and they were all wearing that same colourful clothing seen in Bodh Gaya. Andrew tried to answer for them, but the monk was not having that. So the women started speaking for themselves, and each one gave an account that turned on the line "and then I met Andrew." The way they said it seemed more at home in a romantic novel than a Buddhist monastery.

The only question I asked him was how he dealt with so many people idolising him. He said he didn't think it a problem; it was just something he had to watch and not buy into. For me that was the least impressive answer he gave to any question. I only had to reflect on how pleasant having just one person fall in love with me was to realise that it must be more difficult than that.

The following evening at the monastery one of the monks was asked to give a talk. He spoke eloquently about how destructive the relationship between teacher and pupil can be in the spiritual life. He himself had suffered from it several times. He had little belief in himself, like the girl I had met at Bodh Gaya, and so was inclined to put someone else on a pedestal and look to them for guidance. He had done it with several of the senior monks, and each time the result had been disempowering. It set him like concrete in the role of the pupil, never able to think for himself.

My problem with Andrew Cohen was that he allowed people to worship him in that way. That and the constant talk of his enlightenment. He did seem to have had a profound experience, but he also seemed to have got stuck on it, cemented there by the relationship with his disciples. But then I have always been sceptical about the devotional path.

AJAHN SUCITTO

After a couple of days on retreat, with the silence and long periods of walking and sitting meditation, I was feeling good and settled. I thought to take a brief break to check up on the bag that Thomas was having made for me. It had been over a week since I had chosen some cloth and drawn up a design. Talking things over with the tailor, I'd explained it all slowly and in detail and asked him if he understood and whether it would be possible for him to sew it. Otherwise I could sew it myself. He was taciturn but glanced at the pattern, took the cloth, and waggled his head without looking at me. "But I must have it in one week's time," I said. "I have to leave Bodh Gaya. Can you do that?" *"Ahchaa,"* he mumbled, and then turned his attention back to his work.

On returning from Calcutta, I'd gone to see him; six days had passed. He had his head down, chewing betel-nut over his sewing machine in the tiny shop. I had made tentative enquiries—the bag…any difficulties, any questions? He kept his eyes on his work and grunted "O.K." And would it be ready tomorrow? He fiddled with his machine and made a dismissive gesture with his hand. So next day I turned up with Nick to pick up the finished item. He pulled out the cloth and the pattern and began studying it. He hadn't even started it, hadn't so much as glanced at it! My temper snapped. Even worse, Nick found it all amusing and brushed me aside to deal with the tailor in a calm and friendly way. "This is India, Bhante, you can't expect things to get done on time." "But it's not the bag…it's about being honest…!" But Nick wasn't listening either; he'd turned his attention to the tailor and was explaining the design to him in detail, "Put a zip here…" and "Very good. We will come tomorrow."

"Ahchaa."

In fact where was Nick going with this whole thing? Wasn't this pilgrimage supposed to be about supporting the "here and now" spirit of meditation? I'd just got settled for the first time in months, and meanwhile he'd already made preparations for our departure—written to the

officer at a forest resthouse at Barachati, about twenty kilometres south of Bodh Gaya, to say that we would be arriving on Friday the 11th, the day after tomorrow. So now there was pressure to write letters back to England, sort out how much of the things we had been given we should take, and consider packing it (but I didn't even have a bag yet!) and getting things washed. So it was back into planning mode; that was the end of the open space. The emotion in me muttered that this wasn't the way to be going on a pilgrimage; I needed to stay longer with the retreat—Yes! Let go of the time frame, that's the pilgrim's way!

Meanwhile back at the lodgings, Phra Apichat had gone rather strange. He spent most of the night sitting up, gazing at a candle flame, and then disappeared in the morning to return later wearing an imitation leather coat, with handfuls of money and meditation beads in his pockets. He'd been on a shopping spree and looked delighted to have picked up even more gaudy belongings. At the meal, the other monks made fun of him in Thai ways that I couldn't follow. The one who spoke the best English and seemed genuinely keen on having meditation taught here made humorous remarks about Apichat being the meditation teacher in the monastery…but always running off on wild errands. Apichat looked at him darkly and something resonated in me. Being laughed at rarely helps. I felt sorry for Apichat; I could only guess at what pressures trying to live as a monk in India put on a mind that probably wasn't that grounded in the first place. And what a name! At the ordination, a monk is given a name by the preceptor who presides over the ceremony; they're all inspiring names, qualities, and aspirations. His name meant "One who is content, with few desires." I felt a twinge of sympathy for the man. After all, my name meant "Good Heart"; that was tough enough to live up to.

"When you go to practise in the place of the Buddha, you must not find fault with anyone; if you find fault, it is because you have not made peace with the world. If you have not made peace with the world, it is because you have not made peace in your heart." The words of Master

Hua ran through my mind for the umpteenth time: How far would I have to travel before I could live out this instruction?

We picked up the bag from the scowling tailor the next afternoon. He almost threw it at me; and it wasn't the way I had designed it. The pockets were wrong, and there was a shoddy zip across the top that didn't close the bag and would be impractical to use. So that was the first item, delivered with hostility.

Then there was the pile of things we had been offered to replace those stolen. There were two sleeping bags. I chose the almost unlined one that Sister Thanissara had passed on; though inferior, it was smaller. There was a sweater and a woollen hat given by Sri Lankans, a pair of Sister Thanissara's old socks, and a blanket that Nada had bought for me (useful on the cold nights). In the bottom of the bag would go the new alms bowl, bright and shiny; I could stuff my hand-towel and robe in it, and I could fit on top of it the water bottle, knife, and scissors from the Westerners at the Burmese Vihara. Katie had donated a sewing kit, some medicines, and her yoga exercise mat to sleep on. Venerable Nyaninda of the Burmese Vihara had given me a Burmese *sanghati*, made of hundreds of tiny pieces of cloth. It was not a bad bundle to be carrying; some of it given with hostility, most of it with benevolence, but all cycled through the human realm for contemplation. So there was a teaching in all of it. And moreover, Maha Khanti—part demon, part *deva*, part Buddha—much travelled and worn, was coming along too (in his own little bag) to give some reflections for insight into who was carrying all this anyway.

Christopher looked over it all with some envy. "You should see the amount of stuff I take with me! Bags and suitcases…" "One day," he went on, "I'll get back on the road, travel light…." But just as he was apparently moved by the example of my renunciation, I was inspired by Christopher's clarity and sense of inquiry. So it is: we see in others qualities that we admire, that perhaps represent our own unconscious aspiration. Thus the teacher arises in our mind. Then comes the devo-



Ajahn Sucitto in Bodh Gaya with the abbot of the Burmese Vihara, Ven. Nyaninda, on his right.

tion, the acts of faith in that person's name; and if that is understood, it can lift both parties out of their positions and who they think they are. In Christopher's case, I was noticing that no matter how straight and logical his own approach was, he couldn't shut off the devotion: people travelled hundreds, thousands, of miles to sit on his retreats. When he had tried to be fair and share his retreats equally with other teachers, students had complained, and he had had to promise to give a larger percentage of the talks. Dhamma had obliged him to transcend his own ideology. And now he had to live with a character called "Christopher Titmuss" whom everyone could see but himself.

As for me, people kept treating me like a hero. The story of the robbery had got around the retreat. How could I say that the action of offering up my life was no more "mine" than losing "my" temper at the tailor or getting sick in Calcutta? Having set your mind into certain patterns, good or bad, things happened by themselves. To continue on the pilgrimage into the unknown was nothing heroic; it was the only real option—to keep walking away from the familiar, the patterns and processes that affirmed my identity. Away from the Buddhist holy places and into my own uncharted landscapes.

And that was actually part of the tradition. In Thailand, such jour-

neys are known as "going *tudong*," from the Pali word *dhutanga* meaning "that which shakes off"—"shakes off" the protective skin of your normality, because whatever is habitual becomes dead tissue, dressed up as "me," "myself." Realising you can't shake off your own skin, you take on a practice that does it for you. Maybe undertaking that jolting and confusion was a kind of heroism after all. And it might even entail being kind to yourself.

NICK

Christopher reminded me of the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge who used to be on the television when I was young. He would screw his body up in the same way and ask questions with the same intensity of feeling: "But *why* do you feel you need to know this?" Sincerity oozed out of him during his evening talks and during the periodical sessions of self-inquiry on the retreat, when he invited the participants to ask questions or talk about their experience and then turned their questioning back on them so they could find the answers for themselves. The sincerity also applied to dealing with Andrew Cohen too. On the second morning Christopher announced that he had heard that some people had left the retreat in the evening to go to Andrew's *satsang*, "And I have been told that they left before it had finished. This is *disrespectful* to a spiritual teacher; if you go it is *important* that you *must* stay to the end." And this despite the fact that Andrew was trying to recruit them.

On the fourth day of the retreat Christopher invited us both to his room to take part in a group dialogue with himself, the other two teachers, Thomas, Katie, and a Zen monk. It did seem a good idea, except Christopher would insist on keeping to the role of the investigative journalist. We sat in a circle, rather cramped in his small room, and most of the time the dialogue consisted of Christopher putting us on the spot by turning anything we said back on us. With me the interrogation was all about why I was supporting monks and how surely I was

failing to do anything for myself. My attempt at justifying what I was doing was pretty pathetic. When he got to Ajahn Sucitto, however, he met his match. It was like an intellectual prize-fight, staged for one of those refined discussions we get on BBC Radio 3. They went to and fro around the value and meaning of discipline and how it related to inquiry. Then Christopher got in with "And so, what are you practising for?" Ajahn replied about how meditation practice is not about "for" but rather "how" and is mostly about opening up…and because that occurred, there was the experience of something transcendent. Christopher jumped on that one. "And how would you express that transcendent?" "Awareness without drives." And with that they both sat back, rather stunned, and with nothing more to say.

Just before leaving the retreat, Ajahn Sucitto gave a talk. I had suggested to Christopher that he might ask him. After the months of pilgrimage and then four days meditating, I reckoned it would be a good talk. I was right. It was taped, and there is a copy at one of the monasteries. When I asked for it, I was told that it was the most popular talk they had.

In it he explained how our pilgrimage was an example, like meditation retreats, of deliberately putting oneself in a no-control situation. How on retreats there is an immediate pay-off, with calm, composure, and balance coming soon after one starts, but then the controlling mind comes in and the lie starts, in which the mind tells us "I have done it, it was me, and now I'm going to do some more and it will get even better!" He spoke of the necessary trough of despair that follows when the big push does not work. He joked a lot, as it was three days into the retreat when everyone but the most determined has reached that same point. He explained how if one sticks with that feeling, one then gets back to realising that perhaps things are fine just as they are, and how it is then that there can be a profound awakening to the all-rightness of just being in the moment. It is then that you see that the real problem is with the mind that is trying to control it all. "It's as if you are on the bridge of a

ship, turning the wheel and calling out 'Left hand down a bit, bit to the right there,' or 'Left leg move, right arm up; I'm doing this today, I'll get that done tomorrow.' We have this skipper up on top, but what we don't realise is that the wheel is not connected to the engine. Life is going on—mosquitoes come and go, the sun rises and sets, we get sick—and we don't realise that none of it is the responsibility of this hijacker up on top saying "I'm doing it, I'm in control, we'll get there soon, trust me. DID YOU SEE WHAT I DID THEN!"

"We need to have situations in which we can realise that the whole of life is a no-control event. If we keep putting ourselves in situations where we can look at this dichotomy, then gradually our relationship changes from being associated with the thinking, judging mind to being associated with truth. Then the more we learn to listen to this hijacking mind, this captain on the bridge, with a sense of humour, then the more we learn to live at peace with it. Because, of course, in relative terms there are control situations, there are things we can do, but for ultimate truth and for awakening we can't do it; it has to happen through us."

Then he talked about how the pilgrimage was a very good way of putting oneself in a no-control situation. How there was no way you could feel in control immersed in "that existential whatever that is India." How living on alms food is good for making you pay attention because if food is not given you weren't going to eat. How it was good that he hadn't set the pilgrimage up in the first place but had been invited to go by Ajahn Sumedho following my offer and how I "having set the thing up, very wisely handed over control to a monk. Because Nick, being a good friend, has developed a relationship with monks where he can use them as something to hand over control to." So that's what I was doing! I wished I had been able to explain it so elegantly to Christopher during the dialogue!

At the end of the talk he spoke about devotion and how we were using it on the pilgrimage to maintain the right attitude to what we were doing. How devotion can cut through the sense that we were doing the

pilgrimage to achieve something. I think he finished with that because the *vipassana* movement puts all the emphasis on meditation, dismissing much of the rest of Buddhism as unimportant cultural clutter. There was a small Buddha rupa at the front of the meditation room beside Christopher, but only ourselves and the Zen monk bowed to it.

Before the retreat started I had asked Ajahn Sucitto why he thought Andrew Cohen had attracted so many people from the *vipassana* movement, many of them people who had diligently practised meditation for ten years or more and who had then given it up when they met Andrew. Ajahn Sucitto put it down to the sense of bleakness that can come if one just pursues insight meditation as one's practice and for oneself. The meditators would feel that they were not getting anywhere. Then when they met someone who introduced them to devotion it had a profound effect, opening the heart and dispelling the sense that they had to get anywhere. They would be thrown into that same profound sense of contentment with the moment that he spoke of in the talk, except, having been striving for so long, it would seem that much more profound.

The kind of devotion Ajahn Sucitto described in the talk was not about surrendering to a guru, however. "There is a kind of learning when we have the humility to recognise that really the learning point is where we go to the edge of where we know and where we control. And the nobility of our life, the nobility of our purpose, the aspiration of life says 'keep going past the area where you can't control it anymore and trust.' And for me this is the heart of devotion. That is not a surrender of responsibility but a profound recognition of what the responsibility of this being is—to live in accordance with Truth, to honour Truth and trust the truth of our life as it is." So, devotion was really surrender, giving of oneself, not to one particular guru or to one lover but to whomever or whatever seemed worthy. Put another way it was selfless generosity. Christopher was doing that. And Thomas, and Katie, and Ajahn Sucitto; and even, at times, myself. The spiritual life calls from all of us the selflessness of a saint.

That talk was given on the morning we left. From then until our departure various retreatants came up to both of us to say how much they had appreciated it and how they would like to help our pilgrimage. We were given small sums of money, little gifts to take with us, and there were some special treats from the cooks on our dinner trays at the mealtime. Christopher gave me US$150 from himself and the other teachers, effectively doubling the amount I had available to spend for the rest of the walk. Then, having tidied up, we left quietly when everyone was resting after eating. Just one meditator spotted us going and ran after us to thank Ajahn Sucitto. She gave him a small bunch of flowers picked from the garden.

AJAHN SUCITTO

On Thursday, after the early-morning sitting on the retreat, it was time to check in with tradition. The bhikkhus had invited me to the morning *puja* in the main shrine of the Wat. It was late, at about 8:00, so that local people could join in, but I felt it was important to honour the sense of Sangha by attending. We entered the elaborately fashioned temple building through the back by the enormous shrine itself: this was because there was a fence separating the shrine from the rest of the interior. On the other side of the railings were the local Indian people, children mainly. We began our devotional chanting to the colossal seated Buddha in the sonorous lilting drone that is the Thai style. I thought the congregation might join in, but the ruckus from the audience seemed unrelated, or directed *at* us rather than with us. The reason for that and the fence became clear as we got to the end of the chanting and one of the bhikkhus began hurling handfuls of coins into the crowd. The children went wild trying to grab what they could, shoving each other or thrusting their outstretched arms through the rails; the few adults made attempts to keep some measure of control. Retreating through the back door, we left the Buddha alone to survey the uproar.

My mind reeled, reached for a judgement…and stopped. Something was turning, inquiringly, within me. I could see that the expectation that things go according to my ideals was just the need to have a view, a position—to know where I stood in order to know who I was. But actually there was no need to have a position. Things were just the way they were right now. And for me, the bizarre, the place of total strangeness, felt like where I belonged—just because it went against the desire to have things be "the way they should." It was that desire that alienated everything.

Instead, I felt that these bhikkhus needed some kindness. Maybe they had been stranded in an utterly strange land for too long. Away from everything familiar and dear with no teaching or training and expected to maintain things according to Thai custom, they must have felt like animals in a zoo. Unlike them, all of us Westerners had chosen to come to India; we could get up and leave when we liked.

Even when we didn't, as pilgrims, our *dharma* was to keep moving. So we said good-bye to the retreat. Then there was one more farewell to make. Phra Apichat, my fellow bhikkhu, was in his room. I bowed three times to him and offered him the special Burmese *sanghati*. I couldn't carry it with me. It was too cumbersome, and its stiffness made it impossible to wear. But I hoped that Apichat would appreciate it and use it as a coverlet against the cold. In my heart I wished him well with his weirdness; we all have our own demons to work with.

Although I still felt weak, my mind seemed to be bright and rightside up again. Maybe things would make sense if I dropped all the ideas I had about following the Buddha or being a pilgrim. It was more important to find out who I was sharing this mind with. And make peace with them. And very much to the point: to feel a sense of harmony with Nick, this pagan devoid of ideology who nevertheless seemed to be in better shape than I was. For the next stage of the trip we would be going through "his" country—forest and wildlife reserves that he was interested in.

We headed out on a dry road. After a last glance at the Mahabodhi Temple, and finding no letters awaiting us at the post office, we turned

right at the market and took the dirt road south running parallel to the river. In that arid land, people seemed unfriendly but quiet. The way felt a lot longer than it had sounded. Waves of anxiety lapped at my attention, then things began to blur with fatigue.



17
The Forest Tradition

NICK

I woke in the early morning to the pattering sound of rain on the roof and felt glad to be snug and dry inside. Ajahn Sucitto was already up, sitting in meditation on the other bed. I lay there in the darkness listening to the rain dripping off the roof. It had been a wise decision to stay in resthouses for the trip south through the forest. As well as the chilly nights we expected in the hills ahead, it could also rain in January. Without our bivvy bags to protect us, it would have been very unpleasant under a tree that night.

Later there was breakfast brought by the *chaukidar*. We ate it with our host, the forest officer, on the porch of his house. As the plates and food were passed round, he made arrangements for our midday meal, which he had insisted we must also have at his house, even though he could not be there. He was a good man; shy, courteous, and very helpful. He had done all he could the night before, cleaning out one of the rooms in his government-issue house and trying several times to offer us food. It must have been a real shock having these two strange Westerners coming out of the night, but he dealt with it well.

The walk from Bodh Gaya had been a mostly pleasant one, on a track that followed the river south. Then our path had left the river, cross-

ing some slightly higher ground and passing fields that seemed drier and poorer than the ones by the river. The feeling from the people we were passing changed too. Maybe it was our anxiety after the robbery, but people seemed unfriendly. Then, just before we reached the road, we met three men whose interest felt more sinister. We got away from them and hurried on, reaching the road just as dusk was falling. We felt safe again trudging beside it into Barachati, with the big lorries roaring by, their headlights sweeping over us. The lorries were on their way to Calcutta, or in the other direction, to Delhi, roaring through the night on the Grand Trunk Road, which still officially runs beyond Delhi all the way to the Khyber Pass and the border with Afghanistan, once the limit of British rule.

So we had been pleased to find the forestry department compound in Barachati, even though to begin with it seemed empty. A forest guard came by and he brought the forest officer who, once he had prepared our room and accepted that we were not going to eat, sat with us over tea on his porch. He answered a lot of questions I had about the forest, the wildlife, and what it was like trying to work for conservation in India.

The officer was disappointed that he had to go off in the morning on his motor-bike to see his superior, the district forest officer in Gaya. He would have liked to come with us. Instead the guard would guide us to the forest resthouse at Dhangain. It was four or five hours from Barachati, and the guard could take us by a route that would pass through some good forest, not that there was much of it left. And we were not to pay for our stay at Dhangain; we must be his guests, and he would arrange for all our food there. As I said, he was a good man.

We left in the early afternoon with the guard and an older man, crossed the Grand Trunk Road, and headed south down a track leading into what remained of the forest. It was a scene we were by now familiar with: cut-over woodland consisting of tree stumps trying to regrow and lots of bare stony ground. As we went on, the regrowth got bigger; the stumps, and the thorny shrubs amongst them, got closer together

and the bare ground decreased. However, it hardly seemed to justify the "protected forest" status indicated on our maps or to be living up to the name the government had recently given it, "Gautam Buddha Wildlife Reserve."

The forest officer had told us how impossible it was to protect the forest. He was personally responsible for 150 square kilometres, and to look after it he had just four forest guards, two or three helpers like the old man who was with us now, and as equipment, just one motor-bike! They were severely under-funded, and while they could manage to stop some of the illicit commercial extraction, there was nothing they could do about the villagers cutting wood or grazing their cattle.

As evidence of his valiant efforts, there were three impounded trucks parked in his drive, each with forest products in them. One was full of hardwood, another had betel leaves, and the third a gum extracted from a particular tree. He did explain which tree but it meant nothing to me, all I got was that it took three days to extract after felling the tree and that one of the locals had spotted them in the forest extracting it. They caught them by setting up a road trap with the help of the local police. It would be several years before the cases made their way to court, but now the law had been changed so that he could impound vehicles as evidence. That was a more effective deterrent than the fear of prosecution. He told us that the load of betel leaves was already rotting, and by the time that case occured there would be no evidence left. I really felt for him. He was honest and very committed. At one point he talked enthusiastically about the wildlife he had seen, but most of his talk was depressing. He could not stop the forest going; he just had to live there and do what he could—on his own as his wife was back in his home village.

On the walk through the forest we met quite a few people, and invariably the guard we were with was treated with a lot of respect. They knew him well; we were passing through the area of forest he was responsible for, and they liked him. The locals would all stop to chat, and although his green khaki jacket and trousers weren't much of a uniform, there

was always an air of deference. We passed through a village in a clearing where people called out to him and then into more hilly terrain. It was there that six men came round a corner ahead of us. They were carrying guns, old muskets that they must have been using for poaching. As soon as they saw us they dived into the bushes and disappeared—so much for the wildlife reserve. But, at least with the guard there we felt protected.

It had been overcast with low clouds when we set off, but now the sun was reappearing, leaving wisps of mist on the hillsides. We were getting amongst vegetation one could almost call trees. An occasional villager with a grazing cow was still here and there, but it was all much denser, and the leaves glistened from the night's rain. Then we turned into a valley, the higher slopes of which were dotted with mature trees. They all seemed to be of the same species, a hardwood with straight trunks and light orange bark. The guard stopped and pointed to them, giving them a Hindi name I did not know. Based on their leaves, I guessed they were some kind of acacia. That one small valley was the "good forest" the forest officer had spoken of. It was nothing compared to the expanse of forest we had passed, and we were soon through it and coming out into a wider cultivated valley containing the small village of Dhangain. We turned off the track that led to the village, heading instead for a government bungalow on a slight rise, just up the valley.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Moving into greenness: that would be good; translucent leaves and light dappling through the gently shifting shadows. Walking softly, startling big-eyed spotted deer—a breath-stopping recognition before they bounded off into the underbrush—or maybe glimpsing a stately elephant shouldering through massive clumps of bamboo or growing hushed to the sound of distant roaring, the shriek of monkeys and the trill of insects in the vibrant stillness of the forest. Spending time away

from the human jangle of the wide-open plains would be healing. The greenwood is the place of soothing the heart, of returning to a cooler rhythm and view; it has always been the place of sages, yogis, and seekers, from before the time of the Buddha until the present day.

Delightful are the forests
where worldlings find no pleasure.
There the dispassionate will delight,
for they seek no sensory excitement.

Under a tree the Master was born, under a tree he awakened, and when he passed away, a grieving canopy of leaves bent over and rained flowers upon him. Throughout his years of teaching, he had always made it clear that the forest was the preferable resort for *samanas*. The still but vibrant atmosphere was ideal for the cultivation of calm, while the insecurity of individual life in the wilderness, together with the sense of becoming an integral part of nature, was a good model for insight into The Way It Is. Because of this, forest monasticism has continued until the present to be a rugged and individualistic option amongst the more increasingly "socialising" interpretations of the Buddha's teachings.

From the Upanishads, through the Buddhist suttas, and on into the new religious works developed in the Vedic tradition there was a recognition of the value of living in the forest. The post-Buddhist epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* contain sections wherein the warrior-heroes spend years in exile in the forest, doing little but assimilating the maturing influence of a world outside of the cultivated mind-set. These massive works incorporate the previously "outcast" samana lifestyle by seeing it as a stage in the evolution of a *dharma* hero, although they portray the hero finally as affirming the domestic and social ideals of Vedic society rather than transcending them. Thus the umbrella known in the West as "Hinduism" brought the religious goal within the society's structure.

We set out in a light rain with two guides, a middle-aged man in a uniform and an old man in a *dhoti* and jacket. I felt frustrated by my low energy: although the long route—an estimated seven hours walk—was more interesting, I couldn't see my being able to make it, so we had to settle for the short, four-hour walk. A tinge of guilt added to my gloom.

The forest mirrored my mind—where was the regenerative verdure? "Gautam Buddha Wildlife Reserve" was a sandy tract with patches of scrub in which morose cattle with clanking bells foraged for green shoots. The land rose gently and hills gathered around us. Occasionally we'd come across dark-skinned herders with off-white *dhotis* and head-cloths squatting by the track. They looked at us impassively and said nothing. We were Westerners; perhaps that said enough about where we were going.

In the legends of the West, the seeker always fares onwards, seemingly incapable of stopping and assimilating anything. To the questing knight, unaware of *maya*—the play projected by the seeker's spiritual state—the forest is not a place to open up to. Because of his blind cultivation of the accepted virtues, he is unable to respond to life with authentic sensitivity, and his time in the forest presents him with examples of his own spiritual aridity. Instead of being verdant it is the "desert," the desolate place. It is also the place where he is tested by witches, demons, and dragons, messengers from his unawakened spirit. Fortunately he has the integrity not to run away or control the process; he lets go of the reins of his steed and allows it to take him where it will.

However, he did remain firmly in the saddle. I felt more like Alice's White Knight, falling off his horse every few steps. We weren't walking that fast, but I could hardly keep up. The easiest way to keep going was to go into automatic and let the mind fade. Stopping and starting again broke the rhythm. That and conversation took the most effort. If uninterrupted, the energy levelled to a dull stability, and I could then appreciate the occasional clumps of larger trees. Some looked like acacia dripping in the misty air.

After five and half hours, we arrived at Dhangain, a village in the for-

est where there was a forest resthouse. Here we would spend two nights, which sounded sensible; a rest would get me back on my feet again in good shape for the real forest further south. We were also to be looked after by a *chaukidar*. He was little more than a lad, but he promptly set up some chairs and, after my laborious explanation, made a pot of lemon tea. He then quietly went about his duties. He brought wood in for a fire and, once we had settled down with the silent evening and the comforting flames, indicated that he was going home for the night.

The local forest guard came round early in the morning to see his guests. We had just come down from meditating on the flat roof, where a cold dawn had slowly painted in the domain of the resthouse—the edge of well-covered hills. Giant crags looked over our shelter; they were forested up to their necks, but their weathered pinnacles protruded out of that blanket like the bald eyeless skulls of ancient trolls. They were in no hurry. Human activities came together in like manner. It took the four of us to determine that, although we two wouldn't require an evening meal, something early in the morning and a meal before noon would be fine. "*Thik!* (O.K.)" said the *chaukidar*, who went to it.

Nick went off to the crags in the afternoon, leaving me to settle into my own mood. I chose to conserve what energy I had and started the repairs on my bag, which had already begun to come apart. In the process, I redesigned it, adding a large loop to carry the sleeping mat and smaller ones for a strap to fit through. That would allow me to carry the bag over both shoulders. *Tudong* generally involves a fair bit of sewing, which is one of the required skills of a forest bhikkhu. It is quite grounding. Its mundane simplicity anchors the mind during the storms that self-emptying draws in.

The sewing was good; I could stay with that. Memory brought up my teacher, Ajahn Chah. In Bodh Gaya, at a Tibetan Buddhist center, I'd met a Canadian who'd been a bhikkhu with him for a while in Thailand, going through the conceptually powered patterns of doubt so common amongst Westerners: What system of meditation was the right one for

him, and what level of concentration? Would it be better to practise in solitude, or did he need the support of a community? And wouldn't it be better, as a Westerner, to come to terms with his own background and culture rather than hide away in the backwoods of northeast Thailand wearing robes? These and many more build up to a crescendo in the mind of a meditator; it gets so strong that you can't sit still.

So the Canadian felt compelled to go over to see Ajahn Chah, who was in a monastery a few miles away; distance means nothing to compulsion. When he arrived, Ajahn Chah was sweeping the sandy ground around his meditation hut with a long-handled bamboo forest broom. He looked up at the agitated monk and, before the other could ask a question, came out with the brief phrase "working is better than talking" and handed him a broom. Together they swept the leaves around that hut for an hour or more. Seeing that the afternoon sun was dropping in the sky, the young bhikkhu felt that it was time to return to his monastery and made to take leave of the elder. But as he turned towards him, Ajahn Chah dropped his broom, put a hand on each of the bhikkhu's shoulders, and fixed him with a steady penetrative gaze: "Whatever you're doing, just be with that."

It was an obvious enough statement. But the atmosphere of the forest life, the use of silence, and grounding in simple and mundane physical actions, together with Ajahn Chah's impeccable timing and directness of delivery, turned it into a Buddhist teaching. It was that direct simplicity that cut my mind free when the monstrous intellect could gobble up every esoteric doctrine and weave a few of its own. But what is the mind? That's what takes the direct pointing. That is what you have to surrender all ideas to perceive. And then it's here, where it always was, like the point of a needle as it moves steadily through the cloth.

Nick returned, dragon-like, glowing with crags and sunset, to arrange the journey onwards. We had options: head for Chatra, which everyone had said was too far but possibly had a resthouse, or go a less-direct route in stages: first day to Kalashri, which legend associated with the murder

of Maha Moggallana, a chief disciple of the Buddha. Perhaps as pilgrims we should visit that. From Kalashri, according to the map, we could make our way to Dantar and stop there and then go on to Chatra. But these places probably had no resthouses. We chased those ideas around while the *chaukidar* made tea and eventually settled on Chatra after an early-morning start. I arranged for the *chaukidar* to prepare a meal this evening—no we didn't want to eat it this evening—and leave it for us in the morning, as we would be heading for Chatra at 5:30 sharp. *"Thik*!" said the *chaukidar* and started bustling around. Then the range officer came round to see his guests, and his insistence was that we go to Rajpur with a guide; it was his duty. So the *chaukidar* made tea and built a fire, and we came to much agreement with lots of *"thik,"* specifying that the guide be at the resthouse at 5:30.

January 14th. Why go anywhere? That place was wonderfully silent. We could hardly pull out of the meditation. But Nick was moving stuff around by 5:45, so I put my bag together as the *chaukidar* arrived and wordlessly lit some twigs under the earth stove to make *chai*. Nick had already tipped him the night before, but when the kettle and glasses turned up, in that bounteous mood that comes with the early-morning tea, more rupees came forth, which the lad shoved in his shirt pocket. We waited. No guide. The *chaukidar* swept up, rubbing a swollen eye; it was infected. We talked a little. He had to go to a hospital in the nearest town to get some medicine, when he could afford it. Nick responded with more rupees, and the lad smiled quietly, a little awkward. He gave us a wad of *rotis* that he had cooked the night before and emptied a pot of *subjee* into a plastic bag. We thanked him and moved out; we would head for Chatra direct. *"Thik*!" said the *chaukidar*. He knew his *dharma*.

NICK

We set off up the valley, walking on a sandy track that followed the small river. The sun had only just got into the valley so the grass was still grey

with dew, and there were dew-etched spider webs on the shrubs. We passed the high crag I climbed the day before, looking like a Chinese painting, gnarled trees hanging to its sides. From up there I had seen the Ganges plain stretching to the northern horizon, with the Dhangain valley a sliver of paddy fields penetrating into the hills. In the opposite direction the valley narrowed, the scrub descended from the valley sides to fill it, and it disappeared. Beyond that was the higher plateau covered in mature forest.

The best bit though, was seeing the long-billed vultures. They were only twenty feet below me, just sitting there on a ledge scanning the horizon. Occasionally one would drop off the ledge to wheel away towards the paddy fields and the plain with a few flaps of its long wings, or another would glide round the corner of the crag and whoosh past me. It must have been the platform they would nest on in a few months time. Long-billed vultures prefer to use crags and buildings, while the white-backed vultures, which we had mostly seen until then, use trees. I stayed there a long time so that it was nearly dark when I got down, and as I crossed the valley back to the resthouse a fear of people returned.

The next morning the fear had gone, and as we passed under the shadow of the crag I was looking forward to getting into the forest. The narrowing valley was beautiful to walk through, the path wound between bushes and occasionally ran beside the river. The valley sides, covered in forest, enclosed us, and it seemed that up ahead things would get even better. I found it difficult to make out which of several paths leading up the valley was the one on the map. The one I chose climbed back and forth up the slope, and when we reached the top we stopped for our breakfast with a view back down the valley. The *rotis* made by the *chaukidar* were still warm. As we sat amidst nearly mature trees, out of one erupted a black bird, which arced across the path trailing two strange small blobs behind. It was a racket-tailed drongo. I had seen it in the bird book, an otherwise rather boring crow-like bird whose tail feathers look like two long-handled squash rackets. Ajahn Sucitto found the bird's name as amusing as its appearance.

Afterwards we turned and followed the path into what I thought would be dense forest, as that is what it had looked like from the crag and what the map indicated. However, we soon came out into a clearing beyond which were a few houses. We turned to the left on a track that headed back into trees, but I was beginning to feel lost. None of this was on the map. As we went on we heard the sound of axes chopping, and with that sound came the memory of the robbery and a strong wave of fear. We managed to pass quietly by without anyone seeing us, but after that we were constantly hearing chopping, and each time it would rekindle fear in us both. I had looked forward to getting into the forest, imagining it would be freeing to get away from the populated areas, but now all I felt was apprehension. And to make things worse, we really were lost.

According to the map there should have been a proper jeep track, but we were walking on a trail made by buffalo. After an hour we heard the tinkling of distant bells and then saw, amidst the trees, a compound of sticks with huts roofed with branches. Inside the compound were a few buffalo; the rest, with the bells, were grazing some way off. Although still apprehensive I went in to ask the way. Two older men sat squatting in one of the huts while a buffalo munched in the corner. They were very surprised to see me but seemed to understand where I wanted to go, and they directed me along the path.

I kept looking for the proper track, and at one point I scrambled up a bank to get a better view. When we did eventually find one it seemed to be going in the wrong direction, and as we walked along I kept checking the map to see if I could work out where we were. At one point I even suggested we leave it and cut through the forest looking for the right one, but Ajahn Sucitto was not having it. He was content to stay with the one we had and to see where it went.

In mid afternoon we stopped to meditate. As I sat I suddenly realised the map had gone! I must have dropped it when I had looked at it fifteen minutes previously. I hurried back, but when I got there, even though

we had not seen anyone for a couple of hours, the map had vanished. I was furious with myself. That map was impossible to replace and covered our route for the next four days, until we got to Betla.

After that we had to go on and just trust to the track. That was actually much easier, and as my mind settled down and got over the loss, it was also much more peaceful. The trust seemed to work on the path too. It turned more to the south and then broadened, and in what seemed no time, we reached a small tarmac road that led to Chatra, our intended stop that night. There was a lesson there somewhere.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Sunset…where we always arrived, at the end of a day, with the salutation to the Triple Gem. On, not onwards, is the Way. So we move in stillness, by opening to the Way It Is and letting it carry us.

In its own time the Way dropped us on a metalled road leading to Chatra. We sat in a patch of scrub and set up the small shrine with Maha Khanti and incense and candles. When we stood up again it was night, and the stones by the road told us coolly that Chatra was another seven kilometres. With a post-twilight serenity we started walking, but within minutes a small motorcycle coming from the direction of Chatra passed us, turned around and pulled to a halt. A friend had come again; it was his duty. With very few words his passenger dismounted and Nick and I clambered aboard, clinging together like mating toads. And so we came to a small hotel in Chatra.

The hotel room was tiny and windowless, so we took to the streets and wandered around the stalls and open shop fronts with families sitting around hurricane lanterns making their wares, until there was no more energy to stay awake. In the morning we had a late start, and when we got moving, paused to purchase a round-bottomed pot to boil water in and a steel mug for me. We expected to be camping out before long.

The direct route to Lowalong, our next stop, was via a dirt road that

headed due west from the main road a few kilometres south of Chatra. We still had a crude map of southern Bihar that showed the dirt road but no villages on it. That being the case, as we approached the turn-off late in the morning, we wandered into a village for alms food. A white-bearded Muslim, Mohammed Ali, took us in. Life as a market porter in Calcutta—forty-four years altogether before retiring—had granted him familiarity with life and culture beyond the scope of the village. Graciously and with careful English he served us the usual fare of rice and *dhal,* and strongly advised against taking the dirt road. He pulled a finger across his throat to emphasise the point. There was another way: go further south on the main road and then take another main road northwest to Lowalong. Comprising the two sides of the triangle of which the dirt road formed the hypotenuse, it was far longer, but we could take a bus.

It was a test, and we wavered. We waited an hour for the bus. Eventually a couple of buses flew by without stopping. Clearly it was not a day for bus rides. We consulted a fat farmer who was doing nothing special in his backyard nearby. He didn't think there was any problem with taking the dirt road, which would arrive at Lowalong after ten miles. That meant that if we walked briskly, we'd arrive before dark….

There would have been no need to think a month ago, and now there was no way to think. We set off, briskly. The track snaked through the backs of a few farms—with unsmiling cattle drovers following us with their eyes—before burrowing into scrub that grew into mature forest. I kept the mantra of the twenty-eight Buddhas rotating in my mind, and we didn't stop.

By 5:00 P.M. we had arrived at a magical place in the heart of the woodland. At Lowalong the forest was evidently enchanted. Its guardian spirits had a painted sign outside of a bungalow on the edge of the tiny settlement: "Indian Literature, Mythology and Culture Will be dull if you Don't protect me—Forest," said the sign. The local elves may have had a reasonable command of English but were unaware that few of the

local humans—and none of the goats stripping every shred of foliage from the young trees—understood a word. The forest guardians had also withdrawn from the resthouse behind the sign; its condition indicated it was seldom used. We dug out the *chaukidar* from a neighbouring house. He was amiable, and having marvelled that we had escaped murder on the road, rewarded Nick's persistence by sweeping up, gathering some firewood, and making tea.

It was the new moon, and we were in the quiet heart of the forest with a house to ourselves: how much better a situation could there be for an all-night meditation vigil?

> *Bhikkhus, whatever may be done out of compassion by a teacher seeking the welfare of his disciples, that has been done by me out of compassion for you. Bhikkhus, here are the roots of trees, here are empty places. Meditate, bhikkhus! Do not be lazy and regret it later!*

But again the irony: two days of vigorous walking had used up so much energy that it was only will-power kept me going through the motions of sitting and walking. In an attempt to dredge up some energy, I chanted sections of the Patimokkha as I walked up and down. At midnight, when there was no longer the clarity to feel bad about it, I retired for the night. The next day I went back to sewing.

All-night meditation had been one of my practices since the early days of my life as a monk. It made a lot of sense in Thailand. The days were so hot that I would spend most afternoons either asleep or in a sticky torpor. After six o'clock in the evening, the furnace cooled to a tolerable temperature and it became possible to sit upright. So that was the best time to meditate: there was no one about, and I frequently continued my solitary practice until dawn, before going out for alms.

When I came to Britain, I discovered that these vigils were one of the hallowed standards of the monks who were my new companions. In the town monastery where I had lived previously, only the abbot and a few

of the bhikkhus and the nuns practised meditation; I had been left to practise on my own in an isolated section of the monastery. There was no standard of group or individual adherence to all-night vigils; it just felt like a good thing to do. However, in Ajahn Chah's monasteries, of which Ajahn Sumedho's little terraced house in London counted as one, the all-night vigil was a duty that fell each week on the new, full, and half moons. Everyone was expected to participate in a group endeavour that centred on us sitting together in the shrine room. The forest tradition emphasised making a determination and patiently enduring whatever would arise in terms of sickness or fatigue, so the all-night vigil was a focus for that kind of aspiration.

I was new to the way of forest bhikkhus and eager to learn. Being on my own in the West, trying to help my bereaved mother to sort out details of my father's inheritance and dispose of the belongings that I had left behind when I strolled out of that house four years previously, had brought up cyclones of memory and agitation. I had heard of a small monastery in London and had met Ajahn Sumedho once in Thailand; they seemed like strong enough straws to clutch at. Within a matter of days I had asked to stay for the three-month Vassa retreat to be held at Oaken Holt, a country estate in Oxfordshire. Of course I would have to adapt to the standards of Ajahn Chah's monasteries, but the tea was good and the small community a friendly one.

It was embarrassing to find out how little I knew of the Vinaya, which they were very committed to. For example, my former teacher had insisted that I accept money that people offered and use it to purchase my requisites: soap, sugar, even robes. Here not only did they not handle money, but anything that a monk had bought, or even might have been bought by another monk, had to be given up. So my robes had to go. They gave me some old ones that were too small for me; one had worn down to a bleached pinky-brown, the other was a faded yellow. When I walked in the wind I looked like a flamingo about to take off. So I thought I'd better make my own. After all making your own robes was

part of the training: it meant that you looked after your simple belongings rather than taking them for granted. But learning to sew! All fingers and thumbs, I was a thinker, not a do-er.

All-night meditation however was something that I could *do*, so these sittings served to channel my need to feel I was keeping up with the group. But these occasions lacked any joy; and the sense of obligation also meant my personal interest and initiative dried up. What had been easy before became difficult, but I reasoned that the forest tradition was an austere tradition for serious, committed people. The ability to endure was the mark of a good bhikkhu. After all, we ate only one meal a day served into our alms bowls, where it oozed together into a featureless mass. However, as this also was something that I'd taken to doing from my own initiative in Thailand, I had to undertake other austerities in order to feel that I was fitting into a zealous lineage. The most difficult being to refrain from lying down at any time for the three months of the Vassa retreat, but as winter followed, wearing the flimsy robes and open-toed sandals on the long alms round through the snow was a practice in its own right. And the hardship offered righteousness – I was a good bhikkhu: one who endures, one who doesn't ask for anything.

I gradually realised that Ajahn Sumedho himself had a more informed attitude about all this. He maintained the basic *dhutanga* standards but applied a lot of reflection to their use: the aim of the practice, he continually emphasised, was to find peace of mind through observing that all of the mind's habits, beliefs, and moods had the nature to arise and pass away. If the mind got stuck, one could try to induce letting go through *dhutanga* practices, but it was also the case that kindness, or patience, or not taking one's opinions so seriously could be more effective. He actually *enjoyed* the meditation and rarely seemed to force himself, but he could put on the pressure when needed. I was impressed that, during our winter at Oaken Holt, when the snow was piled in drifts, he would leap out of his sleeping bag at 4 A.M. and jump into the snow, rubbing it onto his bare chest. "I have a lot of aversion to being cold," he explained,

"and something in me wants to huddle up in my sleeping bag." However, on another occasion, he gently poked fun at the austere tradition. I was in his meditation hut when some curtains were brought round to hang across its glass front—both for privacy and insulation. He began the job of hanging the curtains with myself and another monk helping out. I noticed that he had to stretch up to reach the curtain rail, which was only barely within his reach. "Why don't you stand on this chair, Tan Ajahn?" I ventured, making to pass him a chair that was nearby. He half turned his head with the trace of a smile: "This is a *dhutanga* tradition, Sucitto: we always do things the hard way."

He was such a loveable man. He always had time for whoever turned up, and always treated me with kindness and respect. It was surprising to hear him say that one of his most difficult practices had been to take responsibility for a community when he would have preferred to be on his own. Things had turned in him, he explained, after five years of living with Ajahn Chah. He had gone on pilgrimage to India, and during that time he had considered his life and was filled with a sense of gratitude to his teacher. Whereas previously he had always thought about himself and what he wanted to achieve in meditation, and how he wanted the ideal situation where everything would be set up for his convenience and he would be left on his own, in India he decided to return to Thailand and offer to serve his teacher. His directing of a *sangha* in Britain had actually been in accordance with Ajahn Chah's decision to respond to lay peoples' wishes by sending them some Western bhikkhus.

It was his example rather than the *dhutanga* practices that formed the greatest learning experience for me. His expansive and compassionate responsiveness was the real food for my heart. The ability to take on austerities and duty (even to the point of martyrdom) was already a part of my nature. To me, the value of the forest tradition was its green and gentle heart, quiet and natural, dappled with light. When I entered that, I knew that the contemplative life was one of still but vibrant beauty.

Joy and creativity played a part in the life of these forest bhikkhus.

Some were quite accomplished craftsmen. Ajahn Sumedho himself had produced a beautifully made cover for his alms bowl and small bags for personal requisites with yarn and a crochet hook. He saw it as a mindful response to a need, an activity that could be carried out with clear focused awareness.

Junior bhikkhus, as part of their training, had to learn to make their own robes. The application to practicalities was a good balance for people whose introspection and idealism might otherwise make them obsessive. And it meant that you looked after your simple belongings; you didn't take them for granted. I had to make the two large top robes: the *uttarasangha* and the *sanghati*. At least I had the use of a machine, but the frustration in always breaking needles, getting the stitch tension wrong, sewing the seams incorrectly, and having to unpick it all drove me nuts. At one time I thought I just couldn't do it. I slid to the floor with the unfinished robe in my hands and looked into hopelessness. That inability brought up a cry from the heart—unable to go on, not knowing how to go on, but needing to go on. Sitting there, I realised "this is where I am." The sun was shining through the window and everything was already complete. I stood up, prostrated to the sewing machine, cleaned it lovingly, and tidied up. I resolved that that's how I would operate: every day bow to the machine and then take it a moment at a time. And if I spent an hour without making any further progress on the robe, that was fine, I'd tidy up, clean the machine lovingly, and prostrate to it as my teacher.

In time, the robes came. The only thing was, they needed to be dyed, and what did I know about that? Mordants? Something about using sheep's urine had stuck in my mind, and I'd also heard of using salt, or was it vinegar? To be on the safe side, I collected my own urine for a week and boiled the robes in various solutions of dye, urine, salt, and vinegar. The house stank like the lavatory in a fish and chip shop. So, for a while, did the robes—of which one turned out lemon yellow and the other a dusky olive. But I felt quite pleased with myself (although

other bhikkhus have generally, tactfully, made robes for me since). More important than making robes was finding a way to unmake the maker of my suffering. Only then would light break through.

Working on my current burden of an ill-made bag reminded me of the need to be less intense about getting to places and instead give a more heartful and moment-by-moment attention to the walk. The problem was the steady rhythm that I needed for that attention didn't fit with the vagaries of India and Nick's erratic bursts of energy and interest. We'd plan one thing, then be forced to set off late and rush along, then he'd want to dawdle around over a view, and then we'd start off again for a while—until I realised that he'd stopped some distance back and was poring over a map, or a landscape feature, and advocating a change of direction. This jerky rhythm would continue until, somewhere late in the afternoon, we'd realise that we had a long way to go, with the prospect of ending the day in a state of numb exhaustion. The effort that I used to cope with this was that of grim unresponsive resolution.

So, in the heart of the forest arose the last option, the only one that works. Be unreasonable. First of all it was just a voicing of complaints, sometimes irrational, and not always coolly; and it was not about finding answers, it was just making known the struggle entailed in being yoked together. That was part of the tradition too. The way of establishing *sangha* that Ajahn Chah had emphasised was through living together until you rubbed each other's hard edges off—then something could grow, however wild it seemed.

NICK

We were still apprehensive when walking through the forest, especially when we passed people with axes, but even on the walk from Chatra to Lowalong, the fear was getting less, and I was even beginning to enjoy the experience. As we went through the forest we would pass in and out of clearings. These could be quite delightful, rolling landscapes

with large standing trees and houses with whitewashed mud walls and orange tiled roofs. The smaller clearings, with just a few houses, were the best. They were still surrounded by mature forest, but I could also see how the people's lifestyle—growing crops, collecting wood, and grazing cattle in the forest—would lead inexorably to the next type of clearing we passed through. They were larger, still with mature trees dotting the landscape, but surrounded by hacked-down scrubland. The largest cleared areas had a desert-like appearance with stony dry soils and stunted butchered trees. We could hear the thud of their axes everywhere and in the afternoon see them coming back with piles of wood on their heads, herding their cattle adorned with tinkling bells. With time all the forest would go; humans reproduce and multiply, a small clearing expands, more and more people go into the forest, until eventually nothing is left. .

The landscape reminded me of southern France, the orange and white houses with high windows and tiled roofs, the hot sun, and the scattered trees. The people were different from those of the plains: they were more reserved, and slower, more methodical in their movement and somehow more easy. They had a darker skin, too, and a slight look of Aborigine about them. They used deep wells for water. We saw the wells everywhere with what Ajahn Sucitto called boom poles: very long poles cut from the forest, pivoted, with big clay weights fastened to one end. These were usually up in the sky waiting to raise up the rope and bucket on the other end sloshing with water.

They needed that water. Even though it had rained recently, it felt a very dry landscape. The rocks were a sandy red granite, and the soils were thin and poor. That would be why these areas had been left as jungle.

After Lowalong the forest improved. We passed occasional breaks in the trees with a slope that let us see out over the canopy. At spots like that there was a good chance of seeing wildlife, but Ajahn Sucitto was reluctant to stop, and I would be able to linger only a minute or two.

That was his way; he only liked to stop at our regular morning and afternoon breaks, and when we did, the place we halted would just depend on where we were. I found that frustrating and had done so for most of the pilgrimage, but now that we were in good forest it was particularly annoying. I wanted to wait for somewhere with a view where I could look at nature, but for Ajahn Sucitto it was nine o'clock, and that was when we stopped, mid-way through the morning's walking. Wherever we were was good enough.

The only time I had managed to spend time looking at nature was in Chatra when I got away for an hour to walk across the fields in the early morning before breakfast. Snipe exploded from under-foot zigzagging across the fields away from me; a small flock of wood sandpiper and greenshank were feeding in some shallow water, and a double line of swallows perched on the telegraph wires. Drawing nearer I could see they were red-rumped swallows, tightly packed together, chattering, and their black, white, and red colouring creating two sets of parallel lines.

I tried in Lowalong to get away for another walk, using the excuse of having to take some letters to the post office, but Ajahn Sucitto wanted to come along. I think he was just trying to be friendly. We wandered down the dusty street together, and then on the way back, I blurted out something about wanting to go bird watching in the forest and left him to walk the last bit on his own. But that didn't feel right and I didn't enjoy it.

We were so much on top of each other, but we were such different characters with such different interests,me with my focus on nature, the landscape, and how people used it, Ajahn Sucitto with his interest in the mind and what motivated people in their religious pursuits. Before, as we crossed the plains, I had got annoyed at him wanting to stop to talk to people. Now I was annoyed because I wanted to stop while he wanted to press on.

I had tried hinting about looking at views, or coming up with excuses

for going on when he proposed stopping somewhere uninteresting—the kind of suggestions that most people would understand—but it had not worked. Finally having lingered, yet again, at a spot with wonderful views that Ajahn Sucitto had walked straight past, I went on to find him sitting absolutely nowhere, beside a very ordinary part of the track. This time I tried the direct approach. "Bhante, we have just gone past another great place to stop. I would really enjoy being able to stop at places like that. For me stopping somewhere nice is important; I like views. There is more chance of seeing wildlife. Instead we stop exactly wherever we are at nine in the morning or three in the afternoon. Please could we stop next at a view when there is one." It came out with the pent-up feeling of the last few months, and it had an amazing effect. Ajahn Sucitto listened with a look of dawning realisation, then concern and hurt.

I had made an important discovery. The kind of subtle communication that works with most people—hints, jokes, and the like, and also any kind of manipulation I might try—did not work with my companion. In fact it tended to have the opposite effect; the ox in him got stubborn and refused to change. But if I were direct and explained to him how something actually affected me, it would touch into his compassion, and he would completely change his behaviour. After my outburst Ajahn Sucitto went out of his way to find places to stop he thought I might like. It was like the dawning of a new concept to him. He would stop somewhere and try me out on whether this was the kind of place I meant. It was very sweet, even if he did not quite get the idea—stopping us to eat our meal at a view of water buffaloes and a few scruffy fields.

The forest that afternoon was the best we had been through so far. The track wound its way through large stands of mature trees with only the occasional small clearing. There were several different tree species. The forest officer at Barachati had told us that the forest was dominated by sal, and had, in places, a lot of teak and acacia. All the trees we were passing were in the prime of their growth, tall but still young. The forest must have been clear-felled for timber during British rule and regrown

since then. There was little wildlife, however. Although we had passed no one else with rifles since the Gautam Buddha Wildlife Reserve, I was certain that shooting was happening here too; the forest had an unnatural silence.

By then the apprehension that had been with us had mostly gone. We began to relax and dawdle more in the empty woodland instead of rushing through it. The land fell away to the south of our track to give occasional glimpses of a spectacular view. We dropped to cross a stream and were climbing again. The track curved round on itself and I clambered up a bank to find a wide vista out across a vast forest canopy to distant hills. I tried to persuade Ajahn Sucitto to come up and look, but he was reluctant. I knew he was not interested in views, but this was such a good one and I wanted to share it. "Bhante it is well worth it and it is very easy to get up here." But he wouldn't budge. Later, as we went on, I asked him why he was so uninterested in views. He answered, rather sheepishly, that he could not see them as he had not brought his glasses!

I had forgotten he used to wear glasses; when I first knew him he had worn them all the time. He explained that a few years back he had got fed up with them. He was short-sighted so he could see only a haze at a distance, but decided that was not important. What did a Buddhist monk who had given up the material world need to see views for? So he had not bothered bringing them for the pilgrimage either, after all it was not supposed to be a holiday. Strange I should forget, as the glasses were a strong part of the memory I have of the first time I saw him. That had been at Oaken Holt on a ten-day retreat taught by Ajahn Sumedho. There had been four other Western Buddhist monks taking part who sat at the front during the day and helped lead the morning and evening chanting. They had all sat very still with upright meditation postures and a relaxed but centred air about them. I had been very impressed. Then there was one other monk. We never saw him on the retreat, but sometimes I would spy him in the grounds or hanging about at the back of the house waiting for the meal. He did not have the same bearing about

him at all. He seemed ill at ease, and his robes seemed all wrong—they weren't on him properly and were an odd colour. He also had an unusual battered-looking face with a broken nose, crooked teeth, and glasses.

On this walk we got talking about that time at Oaken Holt. He told me how he had misunderstood the *dhutanga* tradition to begin with, thinking the idea was simply to make things more difficult. He had me in stitches as he described how that summer he had taken on several of the *dhutanga* vows as well as the practice recommended by the Buddha of drinking urine as a medicine. It was something the Buddha had only suggested for when there was no other medicine, but because a visitor had recently recommended "urine therapy," some of the monks had been trying it. Ajahn Sucitto decided to do it as part of a ten-day fast, and he made a vow to drink it all! He hadn't realised that was physically impossible. Everything he drank, including the urine, came out again as urine, and so his room slowly filled with bottles of the stuff until no room was left on the floor and he got chronic diarrhoea. Stumbling down to the toilet for the umpteenth time one night, he finally realised that this couldn't be right!

It had been a significant time in my life too. I had, by then, become disillusioned with the Goenka meditation tradition. It did not seem right to put so much effort into technique. I had come to enjoy just sitting in meditation, listening to the sound of silence and the way it would be broken by bird song. So I went off to a Zen monastery, as they were supposed to practise just sitting in silence. While I liked the meditation, I did not like the discipline—we got told off for looking at the view. So when I heard of a retreat to be taught by Ajahn Sumedho I signed up. It was a revelation. He had us using all manner of meditation techniques and none. The emphasis was on personal enquiry not technique, and he spoke with an insight I had never heard before into the ways of the mind.

From then on I slowly got more involved with the Forest Sangha in Britain. It was also then that I made up my mind to accept the offer of

a three-year grant to do a doctorate in plant ecology at Newcastle University. Appropriate really, studying plant ecology and supporting the establishment of the Forest Sangha.

AJAHN SUCITTO

After Lowalong the greenness was more profound. I felt more rested and the heart felt settled; there was no map or alternative paths to distract attention from the walking. The distance to Panki was estimated to be fewer than thirty kilometres, an easy day's walk. The forest was thicker, although it still did not match up to my TV image of "the jungle." In fact it wasn't even as dense as some old broad-leaved woodland in England. But there was the wonderful ambience of shade and light, of green demonstrating how many different forms it can take, and of the wholeness of life. It was disruptive to keep stopping to look at separate elements of it—a bit like getting off a horse that you're riding in order to stare at its fetlocks—but I was trying to include Nick as an aspect of nature that I was to flow along with.

By mid afternoon we were coming to the edge of the upland and looking down over a plain to the west. In the hazy sunshine it spread out invitingly in a welcoming gesture, and our path as we descended led us to one of those broad shallow rivers that refresh the traveller, the buffalo, and the weary farm worker throughout India. Even the great trucks get driven into the river to bathe; the driver, with his *dhoti* rolled up his thighs, stands beside his massive beast washing down its chrome and emblazoned flanks as lovingly as the ploughman does his buffalo. We too sat by the river and took in its wetness and its flow.

Panki's main street smelt like an old goat. Sub-lieutenant Singh, commanding the street from a simple bench, rotund in stature and theatrical in manner, was obviously lord of the domain. "First we will drink tea, and talk later." After tea he went to his jeep, commandeered a few passers-by to bump start it, and waved us into the back.

Rifle butts were slapped and white-gloved hands snapped into salute as the jeep arrived at district headquarters and disgorged its chief. Crisply clad officers began bustling around. We were settled in the dak bungalow opposite, and armed guards were stationed around it to protect us—as they did the rest of Panki—from the bandit gangs of "Naxalites." Safely inside, sub-lieutenant Singh, joined by the equally large district administrator, ascertained our needs ("We would like to have *parothas* for breakfast," said Nick before I could stifle him. "No problem!" was the booming reply) and then got down to the important business of reviewing our route in terms of Naxalites. Clearly our proposed route due south to Betla was out of the question; that way led straight through Naxalite territory.

Nick's protests were useless, the police were not going to have it—the Naxalites were active and had recently bombed a local police station. Wondering who these personifications of evil were, I then remembered them from Geoffrey Moorehouse's book on Calcutta as being a Maoist-inspired revolutionary group that attacked wealthy landowners. But surely that was years ago, and in West Bengal…but now the word was being used to give any outlaw gang of dispossessed peasants an identity. And they gave the police a sense of mission. They guarded us all night—much to Nick's aggravation, the hawking and chatting and stomping around outside our window kept waking him. As for myself, I slept like the dead, suffering only from a dream of a hot chocolate drink—which turned out to be just that.

In the morning the dream of those glorious *parothas* faded. Contemplative anticipation gave up at seven A.M. to the recognition that the chalice of bounty had been taken from us. It must have been asking for it that did it; that's always the trap. The bustling castle of plenty now appeared deserted; sub-lieutenant Singh was not in evidence, and there were only a few silent guards. So we went off to the bazaar for succour, but that was lifeless too. We returned to the police station, packed our bags, and sat in a roadside stall with some tea to ponder the Way.

A fellow contemplative in the *chai* shop, a doctor, paid for our teas and started up some conversation. He was a relaxed man but confirmed that the Naxalites were a real threat. Our alternative route was another two-sides-of-the-triangle option, going west to Lesliganj and Daltonganj before turning south to Betla. And there was a bus. That was the Way It Is as far as I was concerned, but not Nick. I was surprised how passionately he wanted to adhere to the principle of walking every step of the way; I thought it was only me who got fixated on principles. I persuaded him that if we walked the long way, we would cut short our stay in the Betla wildlife park, which I knew he was looking forward to. The compromise was to ride as far as Lesliganj and walk to Betla from there. The bus pulled up and we settled down on the roof amongst the firewood and spare tyres without further debate.

How delightful that bus ride! Borne on the wings of that rustic genie, the sky unfurling overhead and the hills bouncing past, we arrived all too soon, and within an hour had to descend again to the crowd. While Nick went off shopping, a curly haired man with bright eyes and rough English engaged me in conversation. Majnu Ahmed, another of Allah's servants, was a fellow sewer of cloth and therefore surely a contemplative. The sign above his shop declared his attainment to be that of "Star Tailor." Our Hindi and English came together in enough places for him to tell me that he knew a cross-country route to Satbarwa, the village on the outskirts of the Betla National Park. But first he wanted to offer us food. When Nick got back we all went off to a *chai* shop where, although meals didn't happen until the afternoon, they offered to fry us some small balls of dough. We ate them with painful fingers as they came smoking out of the pan. The locals gathering around us had a transistor radio—and above its whistling soared the serene accents of the BBC World Service. In the huddle of bodies, undisturbed by raw reality, the voice calmly assured us that war had broken out in the Persian Gulf region. As our fingers burned from the fried dough, the American military were moving to liberate Kuwait, and the Star Tailor was trying to

chart our route. Nick was trying to get it clear, which meant interrogating the English-speaker further; I felt we should just trust our lucky Star. "Dr. Vince" (who was both Christian and English) and "Tumbagara" were two Betla references that everyone agreed on. I reckoned that was all we needed to know, and when Nick was satisfied, we walked around in circles with the war ringing in my mind for a while before finding a path that led gradually upwards.

It was a thinly grassed plateau and soon the grass disappeared. Rocks roasted on the empty land. Occasionally even in this desert, a stranger would appear to show us the way. I felt peaceful, timeless, moving on under a glaring sun. Somewhere there was Dr. Vince—a man of God and a healer—and somehow we'd find him.

NICK

The change of plans at Panki had been a disappointment for me. By the time we had got there, I was really enjoying walking in the forest. When we had first seen Panki, through a gap in the forest, we were looking down on the wide green fertile valley dotted with trees like a southern English landscape. On the other side of the valley there was high ground with more forest, and I realised happily that our planned route would take us through it. But then the fat police chief had told us about the Naxalites. From what I knew of the Naxalites, they were more likely to be a threat to the fat police chief than to us, but after the robbery I could hardly insist. Then, as we came down the valley sitting on the luggage rack on top of the bus, I watched as the forest on the hill sides slowly turned to scrub and then disappeared, and from Leslieganj we had to walk across bare stony hills.

Originally I had hoped to get to the resthouse at Betla the night after Panki, but with the detour that was not possible. It was still too cold for Ajahn Sucitto to sleep outside—he suffered with the cold more than me. So we needed some shelter. Now whenever we asked the way to

Satbarwa, the locals would nod and mention Dr. Vince. By the time we finally got to Satbarwa, we had heard so often of Dr. Vince that we asked for him and were sent on up the main road to his hospital in Tumbagara.

It was getting dark as we walked out of Satbarwa. Again we were looking for a place to stay with lorries roaring by, sweeping us with their headlights. The clouds that had started building up that afternoon portended rain overnight, and I began to pray that Dr. Vince was going to be another good man who would take us in.



18

A Matter of Survival

AJAHN SUCITTO

Looking back on how spaced out I was, I reckon the sun must have gone to my head. It felt like I was a blurred wholeness – sensitive, raw even, but vibrant – through which places, events, and people were moving; that they were moving through me, rather than me moving through them. The thumping rhythm of walking, the trucks clattering past in the light rain: everything left its mark, sometimes a churning tide. I wondered from time to time how was I supposed to act in all this. Or not act at all?

We came to Tumbagara, a small village on the main road to Ranchi south of Satbarwa. Nick looked like a tramp with his beaten-up old holdall and ragged clothes. I felt scruffy; my robes were grimy, my feet black and cracked. Cold-water rinses only diluted the dirt caked on by the sweat of the journey, and shaving the face felt irrelevant. Mind was just as shaggy: in ten weeks' walking I'd dropped into unrefined wayfaring mode where conversation comes out disconnected and just when it will, and sometimes you can't get the energy to come up with a reply. We'd abandoned being reasonable with each other, it made things simpler; but standing at the neatly fashioned gate of Dr. Vince's hospital I thought it was time to recollect some of the social niceties. I remem-

bered about knocking on doors and saying "sorry," "please," and "thank you" a lot. I'd got out of the habit; social graces were all to do with people feeling that they owned the space they lived in.

"Nav Jivan" ran above the gate in wrought iron: that must mean "new life," a good sign, if a mite evangelical. A Christian place would be forgiving at least. There being no gatekeeper and no bell to ring, we entered, following a path that proceeded across the grounds. There had been some attempt at gardening. A smiling Indian woman in a uniform responded affirmatively to our inquiries. Some instinct in me felt uneasy: this was the first time that a woman had smiled at us in India. Moreover it was a Christian smile—one of those that wants you to know that you are being smiled at. I didn't know if I wanted to be accepted *that* much; it was good to retain a bit of rough unpalatableness, just for the sake of personal definition.

We were guided to a simple single-storey building. Inside, lots of smiles greeted us along with a pleasant female flutter that caused me to feel even grubbier and slightly defensive. A Western woman, pale, large, and wearing Indian clothes, came to meet us. Her friendly awkwardness and sense of distance were reassuringly English. She moved her hands in gestures that suggested, but did not impose, an invitation, and introduced herself as Wendy. Her husband Dr. Colin Binks ("Dr. Vince,"—V and B are interchangeable in India) was busy right now, so she would show us round, if we liked. Wendy had a comfortable English bathos and had the expatriate's grace of being agreeably bemused by the non-English nature of life. She was a perfect guide. I would have found the shy but shining responsiveness of the Indian nurses almost too much. Being attuned to a more dour kind of dialogue between the body, the mind, and the gritty earth, this female enthusiasm was rushing through me like strong coffee. But Wendy was wonderfully matter-of-fact and let the place speak for itself.

The hospital had a hundred beds but even more occupants and was very cheerful. Wendy explained the system. In the male wards, the wife

was allowed to sleep under the bed, but not vice versa. However, in every ward that we saw, the patients' relatives had moved in, bringing food and a few belongings with them. Some of the patients had a relative squatting on the bed by their feet. Family *dharma* is about continual belonging—even in sickness, even in death.

Wendy brightly led us through the hospital and across the grounds past the little church—which she alluded to in half a sentence—to the Binks' bungalow with its little garden. She opened the door and we stepped into middle England: the three-piece suite, the marquetry pictures on the wall, the carpet on the floor, the bookcase (Bible and some Christian works amongst others), a sprinkling of Christmas cards, the apologies for the place being such a mess (a couple of balls of wool on the floor, a flute on a chair), and would we like some tea? Or hot chocolate? Over my chocolate I thought it better to say as little as possible until I got used to the English idiom again and watch out for the signs of embarrassment. Anyway, Nick was happy to chat away, and Wendy settled down on the sofa, picked up the rug that she was knotting, and took in the story of our journey with genuine interest. I was surprised at how different Nick's narrative sounded from my memories; but somehow the implications of that didn't dawn on me at the time. I was drifting in my chocolate and feeling out the room.

Colin showed up later, apologising for being held up in surgery. There had been a casualty, and he'd been stitching up some severed tendons in a man's hand. He was in his thirties, fresh-faced and enthusiastic. He was as likeable as Wendy, and equally interested. They had been here for ten years and quietly confessed to the thought that God had sent them here. I had to admire their ability to adapt to life in Tumbagara: "Yes it does get hot," Wendy commented casually, "whatever 120 degrees is supposed to be in centigrade." And in the winter, when every Bihari villager was huddling over a fire of burning straw, they did not build a fire: "It only gets cold for a week or so." They came from Cheltenham of all places, so the furnishings and the neat garden made a lot of sense

as a means of psychological survival. It felt as though they were glad to have our company. We would be very welcome to stay the night, or longer. By good fortune, there was an unofficial way into the Betla National Park that we could get to from the hospital; it would save us a long walk around to the main entrance, with whatever hassles would have awaited us there.

Eventually I got Colin round to talking tentatively about religion. The hospital had been set up by the Mennonites, a North American Protestant sect I had only vaguely heard of. There didn't seem to be a particular doctrine, or maybe Colin didn't want to go into details; the main thing seemed to be to live a truly Christian life. There was a church, but the Binks' practice seemed to be more individual and internalised, not even that easy to express, particularly if one is English. Having adjusted to the convention, the conversation was becoming animated; we had better apologise for taking up so much of their time and head for bed. They took us over to the small guest house and offered us a couple of rooms with beds that had sheets and blankets on them, an adjacent shower with hot water, then added a few apologies for the inadequacy of the lodgings. Breakfast?

Next morning, January 19th according to my diary, an Indian girl brought some platters in laden with *parothas,* toast, a pan of scrambled eggs, butter, marmalade, and pots of tea. The plates and cutlery were of secondary interest—it was strange to use all this hardware again, especially as there seemed to be more than we needed. We took some cups and cutlery and briefly surveyed the offering, careful to keep to the mendicant's sacred code of even shares. Fifty-fifty: that meant three slices of toast for Nick and three for me; and the precision of the allocation of those precious eggs would have done credit to Solomon, or a desert patriarch dividing his domain amongst his sons. Nothing was left to chance, not a crumb. Then we set to, steadily and in earnest silence, letting the good food and the warm tea flow into us, and feeling the body enthuse with energy. "Enthusiasm" means to be "filled with a god." No

wonder eating is so often a part of religious observances. What a pantheon we worship! Or is it one god with many names?

The communion was all over soon, or at least for us. Just as we were clearing up and getting to our feet, an Indian woman in a white coat came in briskly, glanced momentarily at us and a little longer at the table. She was no shy village maid like the nurses; this was an educated woman. She didn't say hello and didn't look at us again. Hurriedly she pulled a spare cup towards herself and attempted to fill it from one of the teapots. We'd emptied them. She went to the kitchen area and took a jar out of the cupboard and plugged in an electric kettle. Nick and I looked at each other as we made for the door, the same calculations going through our minds: the "surplus" plates and cutlery, the extra teacup…six slices of toast is as easily divided by three as it is by two. The doctor sat down in silence with her cup of coffee and buried her attention in some papers. Merciless heavens! While possessed by the gods of the table, we had eaten her breakfast!

You forget that civilised people don't have to eat everything that is set before them. Our front as socialised humans was blown, but Colin and Wendy laughed it off. "We nearly ate the plates as well," I said, as Nick explained that we hadn't eaten anything as sustaining as that in… how long? The last few days had just been rice with a little *dhal* or variations on *rotis* and biscuits. They said we must come back when we left the park. Meanwhile Nick lost the book on Indian birdlife that he had purchased in Calcutta; an unintended sacrifice, it may have served for atonement.

NICK

We left the hospital through the back, the way the people from the local villages came and went. The young man Wendy had asked to guide us knew many of them, and we stopped often as we made our way across the fields and through two small villages. Then the track left cultivation

and people. Climbing slightly, it wound its way through scrubland, and then the land dropped before us and we were looking down into the valley of the Auranga River. The slopes below us were covered in thorny shrubs with patches of bare stony ground showing between them, but the much flatter land on the other side of the river was covered in mature forest. The difference between the two sides was startling, as if someone had recently mown our side with a giant lawn mower.

The river was the boundary for the Betla National Park and the Palamau Wildlife Reserve. It is one of nine reserves that make up Project Tiger, a high-profile and well-funded wildlife project. The small white government hut on the far side of the river would be the base for a forest guard and the reason for the abrupt change in the fortune of the forest.

Project Tiger is one of the best-known conservation projects in the world. It was set up by Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s as part of her response to the world-wide concern about the fate of the tiger. India had the largest remaining population of tigers in the world, but the estimate of 30,000 tigers made just after the war had declined by then to 1,800. With a lot of financial help from the World Wide Fund for Nature, the project turned the decline in tiger numbers into an increase, so that by the 1980s tigers were flourishing again in India.

The track led down the slope, cutting back on itself several times, and as we started down, we heard the long eerie wail of a jackal. At the river we took off our sandals and waded across, our calves being tugged at by the shallow fast-flowing river, causing us to wobble occasionally on the stony bed. On the other side, our guide led us past the hut and to a track inside the forest, where he took his leave. We were amidst open forest with well-spaced tall trees and a lot of light reaching the forest floor; good tiger territory with plenty of grazing for the deer they prey on. It was also very beautiful, and we slowed to take it all in, each of us walking along on our own. We came to a fort long ago engulfed by the forest. There were high stone walls on top of a low crag covered in creepers, and a ruined entrance-way through which we could see tall trees growing inside.

I heard the stuttering of an Indian motor-bike coming down a side track from the fort. It pulled up next to Ajahn Sucitto, who was ahead of me, and as it did, the woman riding pillion put her hands in *anjali* and bowed to him. As I arrived the riders were struggling with their crash helmets, and from under them emerged a smiling Indian couple. The Upadhyays, Mr. and Mrs., spoke English with only the slightest of Indian accents, and they explained they were both Buddhists, followers of the Tibetan tradition. They had just been to Bodh Gaya following the Dalai Lama's Kalachakra empowerment at Sarnath and were now on their way home to Benares via some sight-seeing. They had even been told, at Rajgir, about a Western Buddhist monk who had been robbed by bandits—did Ajahn Sucitto know him?

We told them about our journey, and they told us of the many trips they had made around India on his Enfield motor-cycle. They had even ridden it to Ladakh, high in the Himalayas. They could not stop long: he had to be back at work in Clark's Hotel in Benares for the morning. So he gave us his card and insisted we contacted him as soon as we got there. Then they got back on the bike, adjusted their helmets, and waved as they roared off down the track. Our journey to Betla took another two hours including a stop for a meal of biscuits and sweets, all I had been able to buy in Tumbagara.

There was much more to the Betla forest office when we got there than I had imagined. As well as a typical forest department compound, with a house for the forest officer and the resthouse, there was also a government tourist lodge and, down the road, two private hotels. We could not stay, despite my protestations, in the rest-house but had to use the more expensive and empty tourist lodge. There a sleepy government-issue clerk signed us in and explained that visitors had stopped coming because of the fuel crisis caused by the Gulf War. He took us to our room, which had a balcony overlooking the park and a shower with a water heater. This could only be used during the district's allocated electricity times—10.30 P.M. to 3 A.M.—not times we were likely to

want a hot shower. Still it was a nice room, and it made my fuss about the rest-house seem silly.

Outside was a big "Last Tiger Seen" board, and the writing in chalk under it confirmed something I had suspected. It read "Sunday 23rd December by Mr. Chatterji and party of Calcutta." That was nearly a month ago, and it meant that this was not a good time of year to see tiger. I knew that Palamau had hides overlooking water holes, but game would not collect around them until the forest started to dry out in March. The only way to have a reasonable chance of seeing a tiger in January would be to go into the forest on foot.

In the early evening I went to see the forest officer, who was a nice enough man, but he said he could not let us walk in the forest without the permission of his field director. He suggested we could use the jeep but then admitted we were unlikely to see tiger that way. This time I did not try to argue. Instead I sat on the porch of his house drinking tea, telling him about our journey and about my work in conservation. He told me how they were much better funded here than in the other forest districts. He had his own jeep, there was a trained elephant, and they had modern rifles and radios. As I left I tried asking him again about a trip on foot, and this time he said he would see what he could do. Then a forest guard came to our room to say he was taking us into the forest at six in the morning. I suspect mentioning in passing that I was a project director in England might have helped. Here the project manager was very important, in charge of all nine Project Tiger reserves and managing a staff of hundreds. In England, while I was also in charge of quite a few nature reserves, they were only fifty acres each, not 1056 square kilometres.

Only my employers ever referred to me as a project director; I called myself the reserve warden. In reality I was both, in charge of a project that created nature reserves which we then managed. It was something I found myself in by accident. I had just finished a four-month walk across England with one of the monks, starting at the monastery in Sus-

sex and ending at a small monastery in Northumberland, eight hundred miles later. When we got there, I stayed on at the monastery, living in a small cottage nearby and writing my long-overdue thesis. The monks were convinced that I would end up joining them, but that was not in my mind. I had received six years of society's money to get first a degree and then a doctorate, and I felt I should be putting something back, so I accepted a post in charge of a new nature reserve, which sounded great at first, until I found out more about it. The charity had been given a site next to the sea left after open-pit coal mining. It was supposed to have been restored to make an ideal place for wading birds, but in reality it was mess. There were major mistakes in the design, the lake had several leaks, there was duck shooting on the nearby seashore. And to make things worse, a big caravan park was planned for the adjacent fields. They wanted someone to sort it all out with hardly any budget and for only a nominal wage. But I reckoned if I worked there for the five years they had money for, I would have repaid my debt. But of course I then stayed on.

All this came back to me while I was at Betla. It was meeting Indians like the forest officer who had, like me, ended up totally committed to their wildlife project. I could see the signs, how he only became really animated when talking about the wildlife and the tigers. When he later took us both to the nearby village temple to see a statue of Sarasvati that the peasants had just made—a crude clay figure painted white propped against the wall with flower-petal offerings at her feet—it was obvious that he knew little more of her than that it was her festival the next day. It was Ajahn Sucitto who explained that she was the goddess of fertility and learning and that she was painted all white because she was the Goddess in her virgin aspect. All the forest officer knew was that there would be fireworks and celebrations that night, and that tomorrow she would be taken to the river and thrown in. He wasn't interested in that kind of thing—just like me.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Although the Buddha had obviously loved forests and had a keen sensitivity to nature, he had said very little specifically about conservation. Yet the more I considered it, the more it became obvious that environmental destruction was an aspect of a broader malaise that the Buddha devoted all his time towards curing. The great illness from which all imbalance, all insensitivity and abuse stems is self-centredness. Enthralled by the tremendous inflation of seeing ourselves as the centre and pinnacle of creation, we claim the right to do what we like with it, wiping out any creature that gets in our way. Even the ones we devote ourselves to, our pets, are projections of our fantastic psychological needs. Strange that few ever acknowledge that such needs never are, and never can be, fulfilled in that way.

The Buddha kept pointing to that. And the converse: that harmlessness and sharing were not just for the welfare of other creatures—they were prime means of pulling ourselves out of the black hole of greed, hatred, and delusion:

> *Bhikkhus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given nor would they allow the stain of meanness to obsess them and take root in their minds.*

In the world of ecology, the statistics are depressing. The large picture for the world is a grim one and numbs the will to do anything. So the only way I can ever feel that making an effort is worthwhile is to think small, to deal with what was most immediate.

In recent days, my own small practice had been to offer some of my food every day to other creatures. Before eating, I'd break off a morsel of a *roti* and a fragment of biscuit and set it on the ground a few metres away from me. Something lovely or hideous would eat it sooner or later, and it wasn't up to me to choose. And no matter how small the meal, I could always spare a bit: a few crumbs weren't going to make much dif-

ference to my own survival. It was a good way to use food; it helped me to see myself as part of the larger picture. And somewhere on the road to Betla, some insect, slug, lizard, or rodent must have experienced a few moments of well-being on account of my passing.

Then later in the afternoon, from the privileged position of the tourist lodge, I could settle into that sense of immediacy. Swirls of spotted deer came drifting down through the glowing grassland, gentle as falling leaves. Langurs, long-armed monkeys with rich white fur, swung along through the trees by their tails. Their grace was exquisite. I unpacked my bag and laid the mat and blanket out on the veranda. I sat there, opening up to the scene, then as the light turned to dusk, brought the mind forward in meditation. The darkness filled me with each breath, but the hours were soon nibbling my energy like hungry rabbits.

I hung around in that space a little dully; then began to drift—sounds of human celebration were thumping in the night; somewhere was the pulse of back ache and the tingle of the evening chill. It was midnight. Enough. I went fully clothed into the sleeping bag where I was sitting, out on the veranda.

Early in the morning we were to go off in search of tiger. I was quite keen on the idea. It was part of the forest monk's training to go to wild places and live out in the open or in a cave with tigers nearby. The fear helped to kindle the sense of spiritual urgency. Meditation masters would talk about the effect of hearing the tiger's ferocious roar, or encountering the creature watching them as they did their walking meditation. I had even had some experience with tigers myself in Thailand. They certainly helped you to stay awake.

But there was also the mystique of the creature. Solitary and nocturnal, brindled with black and gold, the tiger has always had a supernatural charisma associated with it. The weavers of the Puranas, the tales of the Hindu gods, rightly chose the tiger as the mount of Shiva's powerful consort. When she rides the tiger, the goddess is Durga—literally "difficult to approach." In this aspect she is no longer Kali, the black hag,

but dreadfully beautiful, a red goddess who fills warriors with power and victory.

We went out early with a uniformed guard and a tracker. The tracker had no uniform, carried a machete, and moved along quietly, bent over and forwards, like a wrestler feeling out the subtle movements and moods of his opponent. We came behind him, naturally in silence. The forest was a rippling green sea, yielding and hypnotic. We moved slowly through its grasses like sea creatures nudging through billowing kelp. Occasionally a space would open; we would pause, look around, and listen intently to the insect buzzes and the waves of silence. It felt good to soak it up, like listening to an old tale and letting the plot unravel as it would. Then we would absorb into walking—at least *I* did in order to keep going; the tracker seemed to be able to stay aware on many levels at the same time. Suddenly he bobbed down—and froze with spread hands thrust back to check us, and a whisper on his outbreath: "*Hatti*!" Elephant! It took a moment to see; I could even miss an elephant in that dreamy green sea. About thirty metres ahead was a female, tearing at some foliage with its back to us, and a calf in tow. The guard murmured that she was dangerous, but the tracker's body, bent almost double, said it all. As she ambled along, he allowed us to creep forward. After a few minutes, the elephant broke into a purposeful stride and disappeared.

My mind gradually sagged into an unfocused daydream; then, suddenly, there was a wild bison, surprised as we rounded a bend in a trail. Its reaction was quicker than ours; fortunately its alarm caused it to run away from us. It was another female and we were lucky it didn't have a calf, and lucky, said the guard, that it wasn't a bull in the mating season.

We kept going for about an hour, gradually coming full circle. I was drooping again. It was Nick who saw the tiger. I couldn't see her at first, but she must have been watching us for a while from the top of a rock about twenty-five metres to the right of the trail as it wound through a clearing. It was just her head, ears pricked, unblinking eyes fixed in

unfathomable regard, with such poise it had to be female. We all froze, and the guard was trembling with excitement: he hadn't seen a tiger for a year. The tiger was not alarmed but not prepared to show much interest either. She let us relax and realise that our attempts at stealth were completely futile. What excitable little monkeys we were in the power of her gaze! She knew that she was utterly unreachable. Her gaze locked into mine for a few long seconds; she offered that dark window into another reality—and nothing more. While we were mesmerised, suddenly she was gone.

I felt very pleased for Nick. Also for the nature reserve; there had not been a sighting so far this year, and the guard told us that this sighting, together with Nick's name, would be chalked up on the board in the lodge. That jarred me: it seemed disrespectful to the tiger, even sensationalist, to have this revelation hung up like a trophy. It's that attitude that familiarises things that are other and turns them into objects for human fascination and judgement: "Do we need tigers? Are they worth preserving?" What a way for a monkey to think about a tiger! But that's the way it all goes, and the sacred becomes ornamental, saleable—and disposable.

NICK

Seeing the tiger was wonderful, only the second I had ever seen in the wild. From then on I was drawn to the forest, dark and brooding, beyond the parkland round the lodge. I would walk down the track, with the deer and monkeys moving quietly away, and on into the jungle. I went several times, each time getting the courage to go a bit farther than the last. It was best at dawn or dusk, when the animals and birds were most active, but this was also the time it was easy to imagine things lurking in the shadows. I did see a sleek brown jungle cat stalking across the path ahead, stopping once to listen, but never anything big enough to threaten me. I also saw some wonderful birds up in the branches.

I remember particularly a big-crested hawk-eagle gliding through the trees and my favourites, the jungle owlets: small feathered balls with two watching eyes nestling in the fork of a tree.

On the Monday I went in to Daltonganj to the office of the field director. The officer I saw was a big bluff man about my age. He had on a safari shirt with large buttoned pockets on each breast and a blue silk handkerchief round his neck. He looked like a big game hunter, and he spoke like one too. But he was a very committed man, and I learnt a lot from him about the frustrations of working for conservation in India. He said for the younger generation who cared about wildlife, some of the ways of the old-fashioned civil service were very frustrating, like the rule requiring them to change their post every three years. He also hinted at the problems of working under the older generation of officers. Many of them cared more about their position than their work, and so they were unwilling to confront any problems.

He told me about the village cattle grazing in the forest, and how this was fuelled by government loans given out by the Agriculture Department to buy cattle—grants given even when the only place remaining to graze extra cattle was the forest. The grazing reduced the food available for the wild deer, the prey of the tiger. There were other problems too. The park was divided into two zones, an inner core area of 200 square kilometres, from which all the people were removed, and a much larger outer area where the intention had been to let the forest tribal people live in harmony with nature. This was all very well, but "these tribals are breeding like rabbits." Their clearings were always getting bigger, and their animals were grazing in the forest. As a result the local people now resented the forest service, and that meant that the locals were helping the poachers. "Tigers are being killed, perhaps not so much in this reserve as some, but it is surely happening." The poachers set snares on the tigers' favourite trails and then clubbed them to death. More recently they had started using bait, a dead goat from the village filled with poison, so that the skins would not be damaged.

It is a painful business working in conservation. You get emotionally involved, and then there can be so much suffering. It had happened with my work. I really came to care about the birds on that first reserve and fought battles to get the local shooting stopped, to try to move the caravan site, to raise money to improve the habitat and then to provide facilities for visitors. Even when I had succeeded, I would still get upset at any perceived threats. It would be even worse if you were looking after something as wonderful as tigers.

I returned from Daltonganj with two chittees allowing us to stay in forest rest houses. The officer had recommended one at Maromar at the southern end of the national park. "It is not tiger country, but it is first-rate forest, the best in Bihar." This particular resthouse was for forest staff not tourists, but for us he would make an exception. He also suggested that we stay at Kechki. "It is a most beautiful resthouse, where the Auranga and North Koel meet. When you are walking from Betla to Benares you can stop there." For the Maromar resthouse, however, we would have to take a bus, as it was forty kilometres away. The afternoon bus was at 4:30, only an hour after the one I came back on, so we had to pack quickly to be outside the forest compound in time to catch it.

It was another fabulous bus ride. We clambered onto the roof again and rode through the forest with the wind in our faces and the sun on our backs. It was rolling country, rising gradually, and as it rose the forest got drier. The trees thinned out and the under-shrubs disappeared to reveal a forest floor covered with dried leaves. This was the "dry tropical forest" dominated by sal that was supposed to be typical of the Bihar hills. The hills are made of very ancient rocks, so old and hard that they produce very poor, shallow, and parched soils. We went through miles of forest like that, occasionally coming to small check posts with red and white painted poles lowered over the road as a barrier. They were manned by forest guards who opened the barriers and waved the bus through. The bus came to a large clearing with fields and then to the small community of Chipadohar, which was not much more than a

market and railway station. From there the bus went through more dry forest, now with occasional smaller clearings like the ones we had seen on our way to Betla, of fields, a small village of orange and white mud huts, and standing trees. The people of the area were presumably the "tribals" the officer had spoken of.

The road began to descend, and then we were looking through the trees flicking by, out over the valley of the North Koel River. The land on the far side of the river was flat, the alluvial soils there more fertile. There were green fields and the small town of Garu on the far side of a bridge. The bus swept down and over the North Koel, which was a wide shallow sheet of meandering water. I just had time to recognise dusky crag martins hawking over the river before we were amongst the houses and the bus was slowing to a crawl. The main street we were now edging along was crowded with young men in high spirits, shouting, laughing, and dancing. Some were dressed as women, and all of them were throwing blue pigment at each other and anyone else they saw. The sides of the bus was soon plastered with the stuff, but they took no notice of us on top. Then, coming towards us, was the white plaster image of Sarasvati dressed in gaudy silks and being borne above a sea of heads. The heads parted and flowed around the bus with Sarasvati bobbing past at our level. She was on her way to the river. The bus began to move again. We went through another barrier, and we were free of Garu and gradually climbing through tall forest of sal, teak, and the occasional grove of bamboo. The air began to turn cold and then, just as dusk was beginning, we arrived at Maromar.

There was another check post, a small neat hamlet of forest department houses and beyond them the resthouse. It was on a slight knoll in a garden of flowering shrubs and fruit trees and beyond it, and all around us was the forest. It dropped away on one side and rose on the other, enveloping a big hill. We were amongst the highest hills of the park and some of the highest in Bihar. The resthouse itself was just short of one thousand metres, which is why we suddenly felt so cold.

The stop at Maromar was one of the most enjoyable of the pilgrimage. There was a wood fire to sit beside in the evening. We lit it in the early morning, too, but I preferred to sit outside then, huddled in a blanket, watching the light slowly come to the surrounding forest. The forest was wonderful, as good, the assistant director had told me, as we would see anywhere in India. All the forest had been cut at least once by the British, he explained, but for this forest that was more than 150 years ago. The reason it was still in such a good state was not because the small team of guards based there was any larger than anywhere else. It was because this was the most out-of-the-way part of Bihar; it only had one road leading into it, and that was lined with check points.

Ajahn Sucitto really appreciated the space and spent most of his time just sitting in the garden. I could not resist climbing the hill. It took me most of the next afternoon to get to the top, from which there was a magnificent view over the forest, with the North Koel River winding through it—but it was the time I spent sitting in the forest near the rest-house that meant the most to me.

I would wander no distance at all, just a few hundred metres down the tarmaced road and then turn off and just sit there under a tree contemplating it all. There were so many different kinds of trees and each had its own beauty. I would be delighted with the way the light played with the dense hanging leaves of one or the elegant tall white trunks of another. The forest being so dense, the wildlife it supported was mostly arboreal. Monkeys occasionally swung and jumped through the trees, crashing from one to another, magnificent birds would appear from a tree, flap lazily, and disappear into another, and squirrels and other animals sometimes scampered amongst the branches. Most of the time, though, it was silent, and I would sit there enthralled by the totality of it and occasionally wonder where it all went wrong.

In the same mind doing the pondering was the answer: that restless human need to do, to become, and to improve. It was that which took me to the top of the hill when I could have spent more time sitting in the

forest, and it was that which has taken us human beings to where we are now, at the brink of destroying the entire natural habitat. Sometimes on meditation retreats, when all the different individual desires have fallen away, I am left just with the raw feeling of that becoming. The Buddha said it is one of the last things to go before enlightenment, the fundamental drive that causes all the rest.

That human need to get things done affects conservation. In my work I had noticed how other people were attracted because we were getting things done. As the reserve I was working on developed and the birds began to use it, more people wanted to help. The coal industry, who at first had ignored us, gave us support and more sites; local business gave us money; the district council gave us grants for facilities for the visitors; and many individuals came to do voluntary work. That one nature reserve evolved into a project to create over three hundred acres of wetlands for birds next to the coast. We were getting something very worthwhile *done*. But the wildlife trust was originally set up to *preserve* wildlife habitat, and the habitat we were making could never be as diverse and wonderful as the real thing. The trust owned a lot of it, and it was sorely in need of management. But people were not interested in maintenance; it was not becoming anything.

That is what had happened to Project Tiger too. To begin with everyone was keen to help save the tiger. But then, when the tiger had been saved, they lost interest, the politicians forgot it, the big wildlife organisations went on to save something else, and the Indian Forest Department was left to get on with it alone. There was a documentary on television two years after I came back from the pilgrimage about what had gone wrong with Project Tiger. They showed how for years the reserve staff had been overestimating the number of tigers and that while their records claimed that the tiger population had remained steady for twenty years, in fact for the past ten it had been rapidly dropping. Poachers were taking the tigers for their skins and for their bones. The head of Project Tiger denied there was a problem, but the docu-

mentary showed the work of an independent Indian organisation that was tracking the movement of wildlife products. They had just captured some middlemen with tiger skins and a thousand kilograms of bones! These were about to be carried by Tibetan refugees over the Tibetan border to China. The bones represented sixty-five mature tigers, and this was just one shipment. The organisation reckoned five hundred to a thousand tigers had gone this way in three years. In China, the bones are ground up and used in potions for rheumatism.

The documentary also featured a scientist who studied the tiger. He explained how the Project's method for counting tigers, by measuring footprints to identify them, overestimated the numbers. He pointed out that even without poaching there could not be the number claimed because there were now so few deer for them to prey on. This was due to the grazing of village cattle on the reserves that I had heard about in Daltonganj. Other tiger experts estimated that there were now no more than five thousand tigers left in the world and that at the present rate of loss, the tiger would be extinct within ten years.

I dare say with the new public concern, the decline of the tiger in India will be stopped again. If the tiger is saved then the forest we were in at Maromar will also be saved. A high-profile species such as the tiger acts as an umbrella, requiring us to save large tracts of natural habitat for it to live in. But, one cannot help but wonder for how long the effort can be kept up. It is something I often thought of in my conservation job. After we have "saved" all these animals, plants, bits of habitat or whatever, we then have to look after them—for ever. Looking after things is something humans are not very good at. It will take a much more mature attitude than we have at present. Maintenance needs wisdom.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Maromar. The mountain was like a full stop. We stayed in a forest rest-house and followed our own ways. Nick did a lot of wandering around,

but for me, as usual, it was just the opposite. I went so much into stillness that it was difficult to get my mind moving on anything. Having to sort out the meal with the *chaukidar* was enough; his Hindi was not very good. Eventually I figured out that he was asking me where the food was that I wanted to have cooked. This being a mountain hamlet, the visiting officers would normally bring their food up from the village miles away in the valley. We had none. So it seemed we would be going without food for a day at least. But the *chaukidar* kept asking, about *chaval* (rice), *roti*, and *dhal*. I had run out of ideas and energy, so I just repeated the words back to him, throwing in *thik!* and *ahchaa!* for good measure until eventually he went away.

An hour or so later, a cooked meal of rice and *dhal* with *roti* turned up; as usual, the natural response for him had been to give us some of his own food—all he wanted to find out was whether we would eat his simple fare. For me the expectation had been that we would go without—it's so natural to assume that nothing outside of yourself will look after you. The fully socialised human, having destroyed or domesticated the otherness of life, lives believing himself to be surrounded by an unfeeling absence. Despite the daily miracle of wayfaring, I was still functioning from that view. I hadn't learned much about trust.

The realisation of my unquestioning mistrust of life was a mind-stopper. I had to sit with it and more. The mind is a jungle awash with creatures wild, domestic, and mythical. At a certain depth, there is a meeting, not with anything known, but a meeting both familiar and alien when you meet estranged aspects of yourself. Their moods and images prowl, or stare, demanding some response; the seeker is in a kind of tension, an ominous uncertainty. Like a wrestler with no more throws, he can't use any more prowess and doesn't know what else to do. Something follows him like an orphan, questioning…So what is the response? Do nothing and your energy and focus desert you; press onwards and you feel an unresolved tension.

All I could do was to open to estrangement. I sat outside in the bright

air with the mountains gathered around, mountains that were themselves wrapped in forests. Just letting things be, and listening. Sometimes listening to the mind is easier than watching; there's not the same sense of being someone separate from it trying to make it into something or control it all. It gets less self-conscious, and there is an unfolding in empathy.

Somehow I remembered a time I had spent with Ajahn Chah when he came to England in 1979. I hadn't met him before and was rather nervous of meeting the great man, who had the reputation of being not only strict but also extremely perceptive and vigorous. I didn't relish being taken apart, and although I had to be present when he visited Hampstead and Oaken Holt, I kept a low profile. However, on one occasion I had to travel with him and two other bhikkhus from London to Oaken Holt. I, along with one of the other bhikkhus, carried his bag and bowl into his room. Just as we were leaving, the master sat down and started talking to me. The other bhikkhu, who spoke Thai, departed, and there I was with the tiger. Ajahn Chah just kept chatting away in Thai with a big smile on his face. My Thai was almost as rudimentary as his English—but it was if we were life-long companions.

It was more the manner of the conversation than the topics that counted. He had a way of questioning an attitude I had in an affirmative way, such as: "Having to eat is really a nuisance, eh Sucitto?" with a big smile, that made it really easy to engage just by saying "yes." It conveyed that he and I were on the same wavelength and *he* was affirming *me*. After half an hour of this, I felt tremendously uplifted and at ease. He had opened a window into a world of a joyful and unfaltering response to suffering. The way out of the jungle of the mind was to stop creating it through fear and self-consciousness. It was exactly the kind of message that I needed.

We were three nights up the mountain, over the period of the *puja* to Sarasvati. The days shone, the night stars blazed, and the fire burned bright in the evenings. Then we walked north and down from the moun-

tain to Garu on the banks of the North Koel. The river was wide and sparkling. Sarasvati, the consort of Brahma the creator, had entered the water. The whole point of the *puja* was to bring the goddess of wisdom triumphantly to the river. The life-giving river—a braiding of currents, a whole system of yielding earth and water dancing in light, pools, and vortices, meandering streamlets and urgent currents—then received her blessing.

I gazed at the river, at that mingling of forces that remained independent, different, and yet all intrinsically an aspect of the whole. Totality can't be grasped—isn't that why we're always breaking it up into "mine" and "other," "life" and "death," "divine" and "human"? Truth is experienced as wholeness, but we keep interpreting it dualistically. Wholeness, true holiness, can only come through reverence; reverence for body, mind, world; all of the apparent opposites. That was a good theme to bring north for the pilgrimage.

We hitched a ride to Betla in a jeep and proceeded back to Nav Jivan. As we made our way along the road, a line of villagers scuttled out of the forest and across the fields carrying bundles on their heads: something poached, something contraband; the law of survival.

And as we continued, another reminder of that law loomed up in the shape of the ancient fort that we had passed on our way in. As pilgrims, we were obliged to climb the massive ramparts. It wasn't easy. My energies were out of whack again, and something was going wrong with my right leg; it felt like some ligaments around the hip joint were strained. So it was slow, climbing up the old steps of the mountain of forgotten kings, tree roots growing out of them. After that it was child's play to wander along the top of the walls; the ramparts carried a causeway some three metres wide around their rim. Arrow slits still peered anxiously over the forest toward an ominous horizon, even though there was no longer anything to defend. Instead, through overhanging foliage, langurs did acrobatics for us; lovely wings beat in the trees a few unbridgeable metres away from where we sat in the cupped roof of a

tower; and beyond them stretched the wild and fragile forest. The situation called for something. I got out some incense, "Let's bless the forest." So we chanted the *Metta Sutta* at the top of the old fortress, letting the Buddha's words come from the heart; letting the blessing pour out of this ancient brimming chalice. And I didn't feel embarrassed.

We returned to the Binks. They were enthusiastic and we talked late into the night. In the morning we set off, going back to the Auranga and continuing north. My last memory of them is of us pondering with Colin over his rabbits…he kept them, you see, in order to have a bit of meat. He looked after them well and killed them himself; he felt the responsibility was his. The problem was they were such loveable creatures, and one did get rather attached to them. Who has the right over whom? Who has the right to be here: rabbits, tigers, villagers, Buddhist monks? The big picture is too big. I tried to get it into focus, but eventually just let the space around the question be peaceful. I think the Goddess must have gone to my head.



19

Like a River Flowing

AJAHN SUCITTO

Now, with hindsight, this pilgrimage is coherent, told by a memory and a little red diary. Memory has distorted it, explanations have been added, and details left out as unnecessary to the main flow of the narrative. But the insecure open-endedness of the moment is gone, and that's all that it was really about. Writing this down places it all safely in the past as something now over, and a pattern gets discerned, traced, and underlined.

Actually, the written perspective is not any more distorted than the ones we each had at the time, just different. From moment to moment, awareness forms perceptual patterns to describe the actual and proclaim the possible. And perception is *maya* herself—subjective, biased, flowing like one of those Indian rivers: a mingling of so many currents and meanders, so much sparkle, ripple, and wave that the attention gets dazzled. Only in the moment when the mind steps back in recognition is there a more knowing contemplation. Then there is only one pattern for all of it. Everything is changing, all patterns are void; grasp them and there's conflict, and yet…you can only experience that lucid emptiness through recognising the current that you're in.

January 25th. We were going through a river. My right leg throbbed with every step, so clambering along the uneven rocky bed of the

Auranga, sandals off to protect the leather, soon aggravated that. My energy went flat about midway through the afternoon. I was trailing along, feeling like a donkey behind its master, attending to the inner whimper that was becoming a loyal companion on this journey. "I didn't want to come this way. Why can't we walk along a nice simple road? Why don't I have any say in where I'm going? Now we're stuck in this. We have to go on, we can't stop here, we can't turn back. Every step forward is painful. There is an indefinite number of steps forwards that have to be taken. This, or something like this, will continue for another three months. And, as a Buddhist monk, you're not supposed to mind."

Every now and then we'd stop and sit on a rock. Then it was quite a pleasant day, sunny and warm; the water was flowing sweetly with the hushed forest wrapped around it, and a happy feeling came bubbling up. The rocks were like some natural sculpture, smooth striated forms folded like strudel; I remember thinking the word *gneiss.* It felt good to give things definite words; it imparted a little flicker of self-confidence. I could feel gratitude and wonder peering through the fatigue at me; I could *almost* touch them, but not quite. Nick was making apologetic and comforting gestures, but I couldn't pick them up. I didn't quite have the space to be grand about it all or the energy to fake a polite response.

NICK

It was a shallow, swift-flowing river, full of boulders. Its form, and the way it twisted along the valley overhung by the occasional gnarled tree, reminded me of the rivers of the Cheviot hills near my home. The sun felt strong, and for the first time that year we covered our heads to protect them from its glare. We stopped to bathe, scooping up the shallow water in our cups to pour over ourselves, and then went on, following the east bank, walking on a narrow strip of short turf. To begin with it had been easy walking amidst an exhilarating landscape, and I had congratulated myself on choosing to go that way.

Then the turf gave way to rocky slopes with thorny scrub, and we were forced to wade the river. We crossed diagonally to a small sandbank on the other shore, our calves tugged down-stream by the sunlight-rippled water and our feet disturbing the patterns created in the sand by the current. Every so often the river spilled over outcrops of ancient-looking rock creating the slightest of waterfalls, and as a result it was slowly dropping into a gorge. It was not long before another twist of the river brought it hard up against the valley side, and we had to cross again to another sandbank. As we went on and the gorge became more pronounced, our crossings became more frequent. I did not mind; it was the kind of wilderness walking I enjoyed, but I could tell that Ajahn Sucitto was getting irritated; this was not the kind of terrain in which he could get into a steady absorbed rhythm. With each crossing my responsibility for us being there began to weigh more heavily, and my heart sank as we had to struggle through the water again. So I stopped enjoying the walking and I began to wish I'd chosen the small road to Kechki. Eventually I even tried climbing the side of the valley but that did no good, as the rolling dry landscape was covered in thorny scrub. The animal trail we found winding through it only led back to the river.

I peered ahead as we rounded each bend of the river hoping for a sight of the railway bridge that crossed just before Kechki. When at last it appeared I pointed it out with relief to Ajahn Sucitto. His mood lightened, and for the last part of the walk we were both able to appreciate the river again. After the bridge the walking got easier, and we reached the village just before sunset.

The resthouse was set amidst trees and looked out over the merging of the two rivers. It was spacious and clean, but our fatigue from the hard walk made us impatient with the usual initial confusion with the *chaukidar* as we asked for tea several times. By the time it did come, we had mellowed; the day was ending and we were sitting in chairs looking out on the two rivers. We put the tea pot on a small table between us. The water from the Auranga was being swept northwards in the much

larger North Koel, and we had a view down it to distant hills. There were wire-tailed swallows still hawking over the water, and a bat came flitting past the corner of the house. Things were never going to be perfect. The day had been good enough.

My enthusiasm for walking by rivers had been checked, though. The next day, having crossed the high and narrow bridge that carried both a single-track railway and the road to Daltonganj, we headed north on the road. After a few miles we had to cut across to the river anyway, as I wanted to take a small track on the far shore that went northwest, avoiding Daltonganj and so saving us a few miles. The North Koel was just as shallow as the Auranga but much wider with numerous sandbanks created by the ever-dividing and meandering waters. This time we both enjoyed wading across, stopping to look down at the shimmering light on the water rushing by. I had my binoculars out, as on every stretch of dry sand there were spur-winged lapwings making alarm calls at our approach, and on one I spotted a scavenger vulture picking at the remains of something. Then I waded on, the water sparkling with the morning sun; the splashing of my feet echoing the cries of the lapwing as I hurried to catch Ajahn Sucitto.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Running across the tract that extends north and west from Betla to Varanasi are three rivers—North Koel, Son, and Ganges—there is not much else for a pilgrim to aim for. You can't work up much passion to arrive at Chainpur, Garhwa, or Panchadomar. Chikni, Naugarh, and Chakia will never make it into the atlas of world religions. Only when finally at Ramnagar (Rama's city), standing on the right bank of Holy Ganga, can the mind look over to Varanasi and play with human images of the divine.

But there are the rivers, and any river in India is worthy of a pilgrimage. Often they are as changeable as any goddess. They can swell full and fertile and, carrying the stuff of mountains in their bellies, open over

the land to give life to the crops. In another time, they revert to being a series of streamlets chasing each other around a wide bed of sandbanks. To me they are at their most delightful when running a finger-joint deep over beds of pebbles in a million giggling wavelets; then, when they have just a trace of water, they are so full of light, so much a matter of flow in so many changing currents that they are like the heart's awareness. Like pilgrims themselves, they bear irresistibly onwards through the world, growing mighty as they empty themselves into a flow that is vaster still. So Auranga flows into North Koel, North Koel to Son, and Son to Ganges, the one who is called the Mother of the World. And the farther you go, the more mud you can carry.

On the 26th January we left Kechki. Nick had planned a route that basically swung north and west to Varanasi. The aim was to get to Varanasi by the end of the first week of February while the weather was still cool; that would mean we could avoid crossing the crowded plains to the north of the Ganges in the hotter months of March and April. We had decided to abandon walking for a part of that route in order to spend a longer time at Savatthi, the site of the famous Jetavana Monastery, where the Buddha himself had spent many rains retreats. There we could meditate and recoup before heading into Nepal.

As far as ideas go, all this made sense. However, the immediate route across the sparsely populated uplands that the rivers cut through was uncertain. Lines of communication headed down the river valleys, but to go that way would have taken too long and would have taken us along highways and through towns. And this time we were going to take it quiet and take it easy. So we had to go against the natural flow of roads, rivers, and rail and head north and west over blank areas in the map. Nick of course saw no problem.

After crossing the river we made our way through the fields to Chainpur—a wonderful temple to Jagganath, but food was hard to come by. We moved on through the afternoon; and found a road going west towards Garhwa. Roads meant easier walking, but more people, ques-

tions, and occasional glasses of tea—a peopled landscape. All part of the trip as far as I was concerned, so when, late in the afternoon, we were summoned into a *chai* stall by a forest officer in his uniform, who insisted that we stop in his village for the night—as usual this was "a very dangerous area and it is not safe to sleep outside"—it seemed a fair enough occasion to meet and be with the people who were part of this land.

The village itself, off the road and across the fields, was just a cluster of dwellings surrounded by cultivated land; there were no streets or public buildings, shops, or temples. The dwellings were of different sizes, the larger ones consisting of a long single-storey house with a thatched roof and its own yard. The whole was enclosed by a wall with a doorway in it. Outside our host's doorway, chairs were drawn up. We were given a glass of tea and the family came out and gathered around us. Some were mature women, probably the wife and the mother, and there were a cluster of smiling boys, some in their teens, and girls. About twelve of them shared the house. We were then taken to a larger house, that of the headman, the *mukhiya*, where a larger congregation of people were gathered outside. A few chairs and an old man welcomed us, and more tea. He spoke excellent English, and attended by most of the men and boys of the village, talked on religious matters. He had been a railway worker in his working life (and was still dressed in his railway worker's uniform), which didn't seem to have prevented him from reading Vedanta philosophy, Patanjali's yoga sutra, the Koran, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the Bible. He had some familiarity with Buddhism, at least the theory of it. Nick tried to get some of the villagers to ask questions using one of the English-speaking men as a translator. Despite his efforts, the response to our presence was by and large wordless. There were a few questions, of the "where do you live?" variety. Mostly people were content to stand or squat for a couple of hours, rapt in contemplation.

We were taken into the house to rest. My expectations of a family scene disappeared. The front door opened onto a simple hall lit by an oil lamp, where the men slept. In one side there was another door that

must have opened into the women's quarters and the kitchen. The men spread out blankets on the plank beds; food was offered. We sat in meditation to indicate that the time of social contact had come to an end. They watched for a while, then some men left and others lay down on their beds dressed as they were, with a blanket pulled over them. Sleep was optional. There were fragments of conversation. An incoherent radio was trying to be sociable. It stayed like that all night, with people occasionally getting up and stumbling around in the dim lamplight.

It was 3:15 A.M. by Nick's clock when I finally sat up. People would get up occasionally and go out, some would return to bed; a man was fiddling with the radio and extracting snippets of English from it. By 5:30 it was time to make a move; someone near my bed helped me with the door. It was just light. Stars were paling before the rooster's crowing, and the air was raw. I inhaled some of the cold dawn air in an attempt to clear my head, then went inside to get Nick moving. I thought that might initiate an offer of tea, but the consciousness of the room was not geared to that yet. Not for the first time, my mind homed in on the image of Mr. Upadhyay in Clark's Hotel, Varanasi…smiling behind a breakfast table. Here there wasn't even anybody to say good-bye to, but one of the men who was going to work offered to guide us to the track that led to Garhwa. And as we made our way across the fields, thick-headed and with grit in our throats, he suddenly began expressing his admiration for meditation practice and asking questions. To him, meditation was like looking at the open sky. Caught off balance, I could only come up with the gruff comment that it would probably change.

NICK

Now it was me that was upset by the choices of my partner. I had been looking forward to sleeping outside that night. At last we were in open countryside where we would not have to hide away as we had to when crossing the crowded Ganges plain. The nights were not so cold as the

previous weeks, and there was no sign of rain. But instead we had got a poor night's sleep surrounded by people. When we reached the main track to Garwha it dropped and forded a stream. We splashed through it and on the far bank sat and rested. It was a nice spot, the stream gurgled over rocks and then between earth banks to flow away beneath overhanging trees and shrubs. But I could not enjoy it; all I could think about was what a good campsite it would have made. There was no one about and only one hut in sight.

As we went on up the track an old lady and a young boy emerged from the hut. They were poor, she was dressed in a dirty and tattered sari. They offered some uncooked rice. Ajahn Sucitto tried to explain we could not cook it, but when they finally understood they just offered to get a pot and water. She was a sweet old woman with a nearly toothless grin, but we did not want to start making fires and boiling water—by the time all that was done it would have been past the time we could eat. Ajahn Sucitto accepted some water and drank that and then we tried to go on. I wanted to get somewhere we could eat in this empty landscape before it was too late but the young lad kept trying to talk to us. Eventually I just pushed on up the track and Ajahn Sucitto followed me. After a short while the lad reappeared running after us. He brought a small paper bag of boiled sweets with him. It was probably all they had that they could give us.

We did get to eat that day at a small village. It wasn't a very satisfactory meal—just a series of snacks, some given and some bought by me, but the village was near enough that we could have allowed more time to the poor peasant family. They deserved it, but I was often like that in those situations, wanting to get on to the next thing I had planned in my head.

For the rest of the day we were walking across an undulating dry plain with few trees. Much of it was cultivated but the soils looked very poor, a cracked and weathered red earth, and the houses and few villages were far between. In the distance were forested hills.

That night we got to sleep outside at last, under a lonely tree on the slope of a hill rising to a crag. We had spotted it from a railway line we were walking beside. It was a beautiful but desolate landscape, with the nearest houses far enough away that I could light a fire and brew tea for the first time. We also stopped early enough to be able to sit watching the light fade from the sky and the night begin. We chatted over cups of tea in that relaxed end-of-the-day way that I had missed when crossing the crowded Ganges plain.

Ajahn Sucitto spoke of his relationship with his father and about memories of him when he was a boy. His father ran a refrigeration business with a big workshop full of men working on machines. His older brother used to get to help, but Ajahn Sucitto was too young and also, I suspect, too impractical. They would get impatient with him and take his job away to do it themselves. It made him feel inadequate and rejected. The times he did enjoy being with his father was when they went fishing together. Then they were alone on the river bank surrounded by the beauty of the countryside. But then he began to feel bad about harming the fish. His father told him that if they put them back it was all right, but even when he accepted that, he still had problems with the worms—surely they couldn't be indifferent to being speared on a hook. So he began fishing without them, and then, after a while of being unhappy about the occasional fish he still caught, he gave up using a hook. From then on he was sitting there with a rod and line with nothing on the end and no chance of catching anything. Perfectly happy, just enjoying being with his father by the river.

I was really charmed by that tale. It was good to be able to sit and chat like that. Later we finished the evening in meditation under the stars. Then we each found a spot under the shelter of the tree, so as to avoid the morning's dew, and lay down to sleep. During the night we heard wild hogs passing on their way down to raid the fields of the nearby village.

It was a cold night and we were only just warm enough in our thin sleeping bags, even with all our clothes on. So we stopped at dawn for

hot tea at a *chai* stall next to Meralgram railway station, a one-platform and small-shed affair just along the line. The *chai wallah* had just lit his fire, and we sat round it warming our hands as he brought the water to the boil. As we were his first customers of the day, he honoured the gods with my proffered bank note, holding it in *anjali* and then waving it through the fire.

We spent the morning walking by the railway again. The single track avoided climbing in this dry rolling landscape by slight cuttings and gentle embankments and just occasionally altering course to avoid one of the rocky crags that dotted the skyline. Just one train roared passed us, belting out steam and trailing carriages with a mural of bright faces, before we stopped for alms food at a village that backed onto the line. From there we left the railway to take the Panchadomar road onto slightly higher ground covered in scrub, where we camped that night.

The next day as we came over the bleak grey hills, the Son valley was laid out before us. It was surprisingly empty. The river Son in the distance was much larger than I had expected—far bigger than the North Koel—but what was the greatest surprise were the enormous cliffs on its far side. They ran east and west to the horizon with the river at their base, and they were at least a thousand feet high. We could see Panchadomar down by the river; it was hardly bigger than a village and was dwarfed by the mighty landscape.

Behind me, a postman dismounted from his old black bicycle to walk beside Ajahn Sucitto. He carried the daily post from the Daltonganj train in a flat canvas bag over his shoulder. In Panchadomar he bought us tea in a small *chai* shop, which in no time was surrounded by so many curious locals that we lost sight of the sky. A few of them then accompanied us as far as the path to the ferry, and then they left us to tramp alone across a wide expanse of sand to the river.

I had been reflecting that day on the significance of our crossing the Son. To the west the river was the Bihar state boundary, and in crossing it and then turning left we would be leaving India's poorest and most law-

less state for the orderly Uttar Pradesh. The significance seemed more than that though. The following night was the full moon, and that was precisely half way through our six months of pilgrimage. We had actually managed to get half way—despite the robbery and all the other difficulties. Not only that, but we had learnt from it, and now the pilgrimage seemed to be flowing a bit more like the river. We were starting to take things in our stride, and perhaps the next three months were going to be easier than the last three.

The ferry was a large rowing boat with two men at the oars, waiting at the shore. We crossed for a rupee each, with three local passengers. The two of us sat in the back: me with my hand trailing in the water, taking it all in—the wide river, the woodland on the farther shore with the vast cliffs rising behind—and Ajahn Sucitto murmuring a mantra, looking down at the light playing on the water as it flowed by.

AJAHN SUCITTO

In general things got lonelier and drier as we went north; the bleakness and the cold nights ground an edge on the mind. Obtaining food required a sharper approach. The first day out of Garhwa, I had decided to ask directly for the *mukhiya* of the village and rely on his duty as host to get us a meal. It worked well in the small community that was farming a stretch of fertile land near the railway line. But the next day we were in another barren area. Described on the map as "protected forest," the hills were like slag heaps of grey grit without even a vestige of thorn scrub on them. The ravaged land was hard and uninviting. We went on hungrily to Panchadomar in the sandy basin of the Son, ferried over, and spent another cold night around a fire under the glittering stars.

These were the days when, long before dawn, the hard earth and damp was getting us up to shudder around a fire with eyes streaming from the smoke, and be warmed back to flexibility. The sunrise was very welcome; and as light came up on that last morning in Bihar, something

felt good. My head hurt and my body ached; my right leg was painful, (but at least no worse), and the side of the right foot had split open. I'd stuck it together with plasters, but what the sand, grit, and river Son had done to that wasn't worth looking at. But none of this seemed to be a problem; the simplicity of life in the wilds put the mind into a very accepting state. And today would be easy: we had decided to walk only as far as the road that led north, maybe ten kilometres all in all. Then we'd be fresh for the all-night sitting and there would probably be a good spot on a hill for meditation. In this area it looked like it would be easy to find places to stop: villages were few, there was no sign of agriculture on the narrow terrace of land under the scarp, and our path was a silent dirt track leading out of Bihar.

Everything seems possible on a fresh sunny morning. The morning was radiant: a cobalt sky shone down on dry forest, sun-bleached grasses with long feathery seed heads, and stands of pale yellow bamboo. The Son River on our right was brown and brawny like the Gandak, pouring down to the Ganges with vigour. It carried so much silt in its purposeful stride that it was like molten chocolate. "You are in U.P. now," said a man on a motor-bike an hour or so's walk due west. "U.P. is a rich state, there will be no problem getting food; just ask anybody." (But a good bhikkhu shouldn't ask for anything!) Soon we came across a large single-storey house with a yard and a few men sitting round in it. Just outside was a smooth rock with a swatch of red paint on it that a tall bamboo shoot stood over bearing a scrap of cloth like a flag. The house shrine. So we sat near that; and one of the men came out to greet us in an indistinct dialect. He asked what he could do for us, and I asked for water. He returned with two beakers and some *jaggery* sugar. I explained that we were pilgrims and he nodded…that I was a disciple of the Lord Buddha, that we were walking on foot and had walked 900 kilometres from Nepal. I thought that would do it. He made friendly noises and went back to the house. Things were moving slowly, but we heard them talking about rice; then a couple of plates came out. As the sun moved they

beckoned us into the shade and brought out a little dish of curd. But as an hour went by, nothing more seemed to be happening.

Of all patterns, the one that we read into human actions is the most deceptive. We chanted the *Metta Sutta* anyway. Finally one of the men came up and started talking about food…I listened carefully…what was he saying? But at the mention of food, Nick burst in, nodding vigorously: "*Ahchaa*! *Ahchaa*!" I grimaced; that was the wrong answer. What the man had just said was: "Have you eaten already? Do you have your meal with you?"

"Remind me to keep my mouth shut in future, Bhante" said Nick as we munched some biscuits and dried rice flakes in a forest glade ten minutes walk from the house where he'd just refused a meal. It wasn't great fare but it filled a hole. Although we were a bit low on nourishment, we had little more to do that day. It was not far to Chandni, where the map showed a broad road cutting through the scarp. We'd find a nice place to camp by the middle of the afternoon.

But (we should have known by now) there's nothing more uncertain than an Indian map; at least one of an uninhabited area. We walked around the little hamlet of Chandni, went past it, and then retraced our steps along the river bank: no road. The scarp rose up like a wall over a thousand feet high. Although we felt washed out, it would be better to scale it that day rather than after an all-night vigil. We found a young man herding a few cows laden with packs up a drovers' trail. He said it went towards Soman on the other side of the scarp. So we set to it; struggled and gasped to the top, turning from the path to a rocky summit 1,300 feet above the plateau. The black rock was strewn with yellow leaves from a scattering of thorny trees; gnarled silvery trunks reached into the deepening sky. Bleached bamboo and tall, whitened grasses stuck up through scraps of soil, and it was all very quiet. I had enough momentum left to unroll my mat and sleeping bag and flake out on a level of rock. It was probably far enough from an edge if I rolled over, but at the time I was past caring.

When I woke up, it was dark, but pale smoke and a nearby glow indicated that Nick was making tea. He was at his best in the wilds in the evenings. Out would come the round-bottomed pot that he'd bought in Chatra; then he'd silently build a ring of stones and gather twigs and leaves, get a fire going and put water on. I'd start searching for fallen branches and set a good supply near him. Then I'd build a shrine out of rocks, overlooking a view and near enough to the fire for us to stay warm. And then all was ready—set up Maha Khanti.

That night opened into silent simplicity. The forested hills dissolved to darkness and merged into the sky. The Son snaked below us, glowing in its own power and garlanded with pale sandbanks. I could see it issuing from the misty curve of the horizon and steadily carving its way through the hill mass. In all those hundreds of square kilometres of land, only three tiny pricks of light spoke up—and they soon ceased. Then there was only our candle to echo the blazing moon. Then an aloneness gathers around the mind and a resting in humility.

Nick, wrapped in his beard, a sleeping bag, and wisps of smoke, made some tea at midnight and handed over a crumbling rock of *jaggery* to munch on. It was story time. We got to talking about our travels, our attempts to encompass the world. Nick had got as far as Australia on his overland trail and had spent a year there picking up odd jobs and moving around. One time he was hitchhiking across the Nullabor plain, the huge flat coastal desert between Adelaide and Perth. The man who picked him up asked him to take the wheel for a while at the end of the day; Nick didn't have a license or any experience of driving, but that didn't matter. "Course you can drive!" his companion asserted. "Everyone can drive!" On the Nullabor plain there's nothing much to it; a long straight highway with no towns, no junctions, and no traffic. Even if you fall asleep at the wheel, you're unlikely to come to any harm. Nick's host had an "Esky" (an ice box) in the back from which he pulled cans of beer to lubricate the journey. That unchanging landscape got dull so he lifted over his rifle too…"always like to shoot a few 'roos"…dusk

was the best time to take pot shots at the wildlife. My ethically minded friend was in a dilemma: he didn't want the animals to be harmed, but also didn't want to be dumped out on the Nullabor plain a thousand miles from anywhere.

"So I drove along watching out for kangaroos just beyond our lights, and if I saw one I'd distract him with a question…'Are you married?'…so he wouldn't see it till the last moment. Then as he rushed to take a shot through the side window, I'd give the steering wheel a twitch. He didn't see what I was doing—had quite a few beers by then—and there'd be a bang—'*Missed* the bugger!'"

Nick was in great form. We went all round Australia that night on the flow of his humour and delight. It stopped about 2:00 A.M. The glaring moon was still inviting us to presence; Australia, as well as India, collapsed back into the moment. The silence was singing in the glory of the moonlight. By comparison morning chanting at 3:30 was a feeble dirge. After that we flopped out for a couple of hours before day got us going again.

And so, onwards, tottering on across the plateau…Pipra…Samaria…. just a trace of a trail to walk along and food even harder to come by. My mind, sometimes streaming out into the wilderness, sometimes eddying with fatigue, daydreams, or bubbling with irritation, would finally empty into numbness by the end of the day…but then as it touched the night's stillness, before the sweet taste of oblivion, feel a deep underswell. Presence.

NICK

We spent the next night by a canal on the veranda of a locked electricity inspection bungalow we had hoped to sleep in. The next morning when I went down to wash, I disturbed a little green heron stalking a fish in the reeds. It flew up into a nearby tree and sat there watching me, while trying, quite successfully, to look like part of the vegetation. The other bird on this part of the pilgrimage was later the same morning. We

crossed the canal and were climbing again through a desolate scrubland. We were getting lost, and hearing the distant drone of a diesel pump to the right, we went that way in the hope of finding a village and directions. We didn't find anyone and the pump seemed to stop. There was another in the distance, though, and so we headed for that, but then that stopped too. We never, in fact, found anyone; the pumps always kept stopping before we got to them. It was only later that I realised that the diesel pumps must be barbets.

The barbet is a chunky green bird related to the woodpecker that sits in the clefts of tree branches and drones for much of the day. Instead of the chisel-like beaks of woodpeckers, barbets have a rather heavy but otherwise ordinary-looking beak, and this is surrounded by a ring of long hairs that no one has yet found an explanation for. We were to hear that call over and again for the next few days, a strange reminder of human activity in that empty landscape of scrub through which the packhorse trails meandered and braided like a river.

Between the drylands were two wide valleys irrigated by dams and canals like the one we slept beside. Water was very important in this landscape. Where they had it, in the valleys, the land was turned into fertile flat oases of fresh green wheat, chequered with coloured flowering patches of blue flax, yellow rape, and white chickpeas. The fields were dotted with small thatched shelters and scarecrows made from a cross of wood, an old shirt, and a hat; and every so often there were villages of orange clay houses. The landscape looked so beautiful after the dry hills: the speckled colours gave it the look of an impressionist painting of Provence at the turn of the century.

The dry lands had their own beauty, though, a haunting and desolate emptiness in which just a few poor peasants eked out a living. I remember one old couple sitting by a house. Ajahn Sucitto asked for water for our bottles. The old man was proud to be able to offer it but the old woman looked peeved. It would have been her that had carried it from the distant well I could now see at the bottom of the hill.

That evening we camped on the edge of the scrubland, which was lit behind us by the moon. Before us, the lights of a village glimmered through a slight mist covering the lower ground. Out of the mist also came the echo of music, the beating of drums, the wail of other instruments, and the low hubbub of lots of distant voices. It sounded like they were having a party—perhaps a wedding, as with the full moon of February we were now in the traditional month for marriage. The party went on through the night and was still going, if a bit more fitfully, as we walked down in the early morning. We made for the house it was coming from in the hope they might offer us breakfast. Inside a compound were the smouldering embers of several fires and, squatting and lounging around them, were the human remnants of the all-night boogie in a smashed stupor. Someone was still hitting a drum, a musician was playing an instrument like a large violin while others jangled bells, and a man dressed as a woman shuffled about in a dazed dance. Around the fires squatted small groups of men, or women with young children sitting beside them. Some of the men were passing around a *chillum*, sucking in turn at the cupped base to make the *ganja* and tobacco glow red. They were just about capable of welcoming us in, and having us sit down, but that was as far as it went. We did get some water when we asked, but they were far too out of it to think of offering us anything else. So we went on, overtaking two men making their way unsteadily across the fields on their way to tend their stock. The farming life has to go on, and that, I supposed, is why they have their weddings during the night.

The following evening we experienced again the taste of the hullabaloo of humanity that lay ahead in the Ganges plain. We had been through the wide fertile valley of Naugarh that day and along a nearly empty but very good road through more dry forest, the last before the plains. In the late afternoon the road took us beside the shore of the vast Chandraprabha reservoir. We stopped to bathe and then followed the shore, rounding a headland to disturb a flock of bar-headed geese: grey and black with beautiful markings of zigzagging black and white along the trailing edge of

their wings as they took flight. The blue water shimmered in the late afternoon sun with the geese honking as they flew off across it.

At the head of the reservoir was a dam, and beside it was a very pukka inspection bungalow, a modern two-storey affair. It was empty and looked little used, but the *chaukidar* said we could stay for "forty rupees *baksheesh*."

After we had settled in, we sat on the veranda to watch the sun set over the water, sipping flowery lemon tea, the trees in the foreground black and swaying gently against the reddening horizon. The evening star twinkled in the sky, and it seemed as if were in a world with only us, the *chaukidar* and his dog. It was an exquisite moment.

But then there was the sound of a motor, and a large coach pulled in to the car park. As the coach stopped, a loudspeaker on its roof started blaring out pop music, and its door disgorged schoolchildren. They had been to see the nearby waterfall and now they were here to see the dam. They trooped off, but it was not long before they were back again and milling about the inspection bungalow, shouting to each other above the noise of the music, clapping and singing along.

AJAHN SUCITTO

February 3rd. Before dawn we went together to the waterfall. We sat up on the viewing platform as light came to the sky, our small shrine before us, and beyond that the roaring water. In the moonlight, in the clarity of meditation, the Rajdhari falls were like an explosion of snow as the river threw itself into emptiness. The roar, overwhelming, froze my attention. Then the dawn peacocks greeted us, calling from the forest and launching themselves in blue and silver arcs across the gorge. Our returning footsteps followed the river in its delight to be flowing on—on, sparkling over red sandstone, through a land of gnarled shrubs and crinkled leaves that crunched underfoot. And for that timeless moment, the world was beautiful, unremembered, indestructible.

But back to the cutting edge. Now it was Nick's sandals. The soles kept peeling off. So as we walked along, we would be accompanied by their "slap! slap!" Whenever we arrived at a small town, his *dharma* would be to seek out a street cobbler, point out the sole and initiate the process of the cobbler heating up an ancient glue-pot over a burner, spreading the glue on with a simple spatula or even simpler finger, then hammering sole back to upper. Satisfied, and with Nick's assertion that this had finally fixed it, we would then proceed with confidence—but never for more than half a day before the slapping, at first subdued as a butler's cough, then emphatic as a judge, informed us that "all compounded things are impermanent."

It wasn't so much the "slap! slap!" accompanying our footsteps; they were just a few ripples in attention. But there was a further, ideological, undertow: "Spending time fixing these is pointless…why doesn't he see it?" Then the trickle of irritation of the sandals became connected to larger and more powerful outflows: now it was a *person* rather than a pair of *sandals*. I would be left with the bags to hang out somewhere with a "donkey tied to a post" feeling while Nick rushed off to fix the sandals and check things out. He would return an hour later, sometimes with a snack in a scrap of paper and generally with a plan. There would be possibilities, probabilities, place names, and times, a route and all that—present expectations masquerading as future certainties. Then we would scramble to get to some place by such and such a time, only to waste another hour dithering around before plunging off again.

Nick's plans meant responsibilities for both of us, and I had to take care of his details: keep an eye on his possessions when we broke camp; pick up the map when he wandered off to look at some bird. He'd even left his money belt containing both our passports beside the Son after he had stopped to relieve himself; only my inquiring after it had turned us back to find it. He blithely shrugged all this off, but I could not see why I had to attend to his stuff when I had enough to do to keep myself together!

And so on. And where was all this going? "To Baranas!" (Varanasi) was

an easy reply we'd throw back as we moved towards the Ganges and into a peopled landscape again. They'd understand and brighten up: "Baranas! *Ahchhaa*!" A real pilgrims' destination! But enough of this show; I was only interested in a place where destinations could come to an end.

We stopped the night beside the Karamnasa River with a Mughal-style shrine visible in the distance. There was no tree cover, and the hard cold night got us off early to pay our respects. We crossed a large dam on numb legs and offered incense outside the entrance to the tomb itself. Inside, bent double over a copy of the Koran from which he was reciting verses, the tomb's custodian kept the vigil as he rocked to and fro—a vigil that looked a century old at least. Nick put some money in a bowl, and without breaking off from his recitation, the chanter beckoned us in to sit by the sarcophagus. Draped in crimson cloth embroidered with silver Arabic lettering, Lateef Shah (peace be on him!) received our dumb homage while the incense smoke and chanting filled the tomb.

And who was Lateef Shah? But then it was on again, past the nearby museum with all its information. Cold and damp from the night we went on without stopping; we needed tea, warmth, food…it wasn't until we were in a *chai* shop in nearby Chakia that my mind became workable again.

Blessed tea. The *chai* shop was large, tidy, and clean; it must have been a Muslim establishment, as there were private booths for women to chat in. We just sat there in silence, taking it in. On the wall in front of us was a poster—of two cheetahs with the words "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." Maybe that was one of Lateef Shah's sayings. May peace be on him! Tranquil depths look beautiful, but I wondered whether I could get through the surf to reach them.

NICK

We crossed the river in the morning to get to the tomb and then crossed back again when we left. Looking back now there seemed to be a lot of rivers on this part of the journey and a lot of water. Strange, because

another strong impression is of the dryness of much of the landscape. By the tomb, though, we were back on the verdant Ganges plain. There were still outcrops of small hills around us, but we were now walking across deep alluvial soils again.

All the silt derived soil was farmed intensely, and it was being used in other ways too. We passed several tall chimneys. Clustered about each were small family industries producing bricks. Each family had a mud hut where they lived and a hole in the earth where they toiled. Parents and children dressed in ragged clothes, stained with the soil they were digging, mixed the earth with water to make mud, which they formed into bricks using small wooden blocks. Everywhere were neat rows of wet bricks drying in the sun before being taken to the chimneys for firing. At a crossroads we passed potters working the clay. They turned their wheels using a stick inserted in a small hole on the margin, turning them faster and faster until they were spinning around, then drawing out a complete pot before the rumbling momentum of the heavy stone wheel had ground to a stop. But they did not make the crude clay thimbles we were later served tea in at a *chai* stall. Formed by hand, they were tossed onto a pile of broken clay after being used only once, to return to that earth.

I had not been looking forward to returning to the plains, but now that I was there I found it surprisingly agreeable. This was partly because we had learnt to use small by ways and footpaths and partly because the weather was now more benign, but it was also because our pilgrimage was now flowing in a way it never had, before the hills. There we had adapted to each other and to the land we were passing through, so it was no longer a grinding experience. Carried along by the pilgrimage I was able to put aside the day's set-backs and irritations. It had become more of a devotional experience than an attempt at getting anywhere.

As part of this growing appreciation of devotion, the chanting we were doing was beginning to mean something to me. As well as the daily salutation to our small crooked Buddha image, we were also using

several of the Buddhist chants of reflection. There was the *metta* chant on the quality of loving-kindness, which we recited in either English or Pali. During our walk through the hills I had been trying to learn the Pali version. Ajahn Sucitto had written out the forty short lines for me on a piece of paper, and as we walked along I would try repeating it over in my head. Despite a month of this I still had not memorised it. I was fine when following Ajahn Sucitto's lead, but if he stopped mid line, which he did occasionally to see how I was getting on, I would grind to a halt by the next. He was amazed. He could see I was trying—I was always getting the scrappy piece of paper out to read while we walked—but I was finding it so hard. He had in his head at least a hundred Pali chants, most much longer than the one I was trying to learn, as well as the entire Patimokkha, the rules of training, five thousand lines long.

The chant that meant the most to me was the one we did every day after our morning sitting, the "reflections on sharing blessings." It was our daily reminder that we were trying to do the pilgrimage not for ourselves but for others. We did it in Pali, but during our time walking through the hills Ajahn Sucitto had started to compose an English version. His translation, printed at the front of this book, has since been adopted by the English monasteries, and every time I hear it I think of the pilgrimage.

There was another river that day. We had been for alms in a winding village called Amra and were walking on along a small road that led to Varanasi. I had spotted the river on the map and thought it might make a good place to bathe. It might even be deep enough to swim. When we came to this river it could not have been more ideal. It was not wide but it was deep, clear, slow-moving, and overhung by trees. There were steps leading down to a gap in the reeds where the locals must have regularly bathed. It was mid-afternoon and the perfect time to take a dip. We were tired, dusty, and hot and, incredibly, there was absolutely no one about. I suggested we bathe and was down the steps before Ajahn Sucitto had taken in what was happening. I stripped off to my under-

pants and swam out into the centre of the river and called to Ajahn Sucitto that it was lovely. He was not interested. Instead he moved off and sat under a tree to wait for me to finish. I could not leave it at that, though, and after swimming a few lengths I tried getting him to come in again—it was great, why didn't he come in?—but he remained sitting upright under his tree, and from the way he said "no" I got a strong impression of disapproval.

As we went on we discussed the incident; just that was a change from earlier in the pilgrimage. But from it I also learnt a lot. Although the whole incident must have taken only fifteen minutes. To him my bathing had seemed irresponsible. We had agreed that morning that we were going to walk to Varanasi and try to get there by the next day. To one with his dogged character, an impromptu swim, even if it was our first opportunity for three months, was a frivolous deviation from our purpose. Talking it over, I discovered that had I told him in the morning we might have the opportunity for a swim later, it would have been different. The problem was the unexpectedness as much as anything. But that had been deliberate; I had been saving it for a surprise! The Ox and the Dragon—to him my sudden impulsive actions could be so disconcerting. He later told me that my scamper down the steps and plunge into the water reminded him of one of those goofy red setters that leave their owners despairing.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Surely we could have sorted out these little difficulties. But energy was the thing. I didn't have enough of it to manage what was going on, let alone communicate it. So, as usual, it was left to benevolent chaos…this time administered through *jaggery*, great brown crumbly chunks of it chomped around a campfire at night with black tea: it gave a surge of energy, as well as the child-like abandon that broke boundaries.

The day after a night in a drainage ditch, having got up before the

water sluiced in in the morning, we were on the road to Ramnagar, this side of the Ganges from Varanasi. A man hollered at us the familiar "Kaha ja ra hai?" as we lumbered along. He was the proprietor of a sugar mill, and alive with it: as pilgrims to Varanasi we must stop for a while and drink his sugar-cane juice, freshly pressed, here! He couldn't stop talking and pressing on us fist-size balls of *jaggery* still warm from the pan where the juice was simmering—"Liking? Liking?"—until we were reeling from eating and drinking the stuff. Even then, loading Nick with lumps of *jaggery* and filling our canteens with litres of the juice, he followed us, ripping hard stalks of sugar cane with his teeth to give us chunks of the sweet sappy core.

So, light-headed from lack of food and high on sugar, we couldn't stop babbling, into the night (and the next morning) and throwing up the grudges and gripes in the flow: Nick was impulsive and never consulted me; then, as soon as I started responding to local people he'd charge in, or stomp off, forcing me to break off and rush after him. Then there was me with my judgements and condescending attitudes…(Me!). Jangling along, with plenty of spaces, and dodging the cow dung in the road, you can dump this stuff. And things felt better afterwards. There was no need to feel bad or to figure out what to do, but there was some recognition of where our journey needed to go.

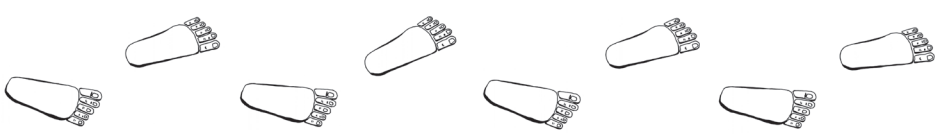
We suddenly understood that we were living in different worlds. What he noticecd and what I noticed only coincided glancingly. And the main conduit of all the conflict was, why can't he be normal, like me? For me to read a line of Pali three times is to know it, and anybody can chant in tune, can't they? But after fifteen years he was still having problems with reciting the refuges and precepts. My immediate reading was that he thought it was a waste of time and was putting no effort into it—so that was off-putting. But then I noticed how much effort he really was putting into it. The glue of his mind, wonderfully effective when it came to reading landscapes and maps, could not stick words, no matter how much hammering and heat were applied.

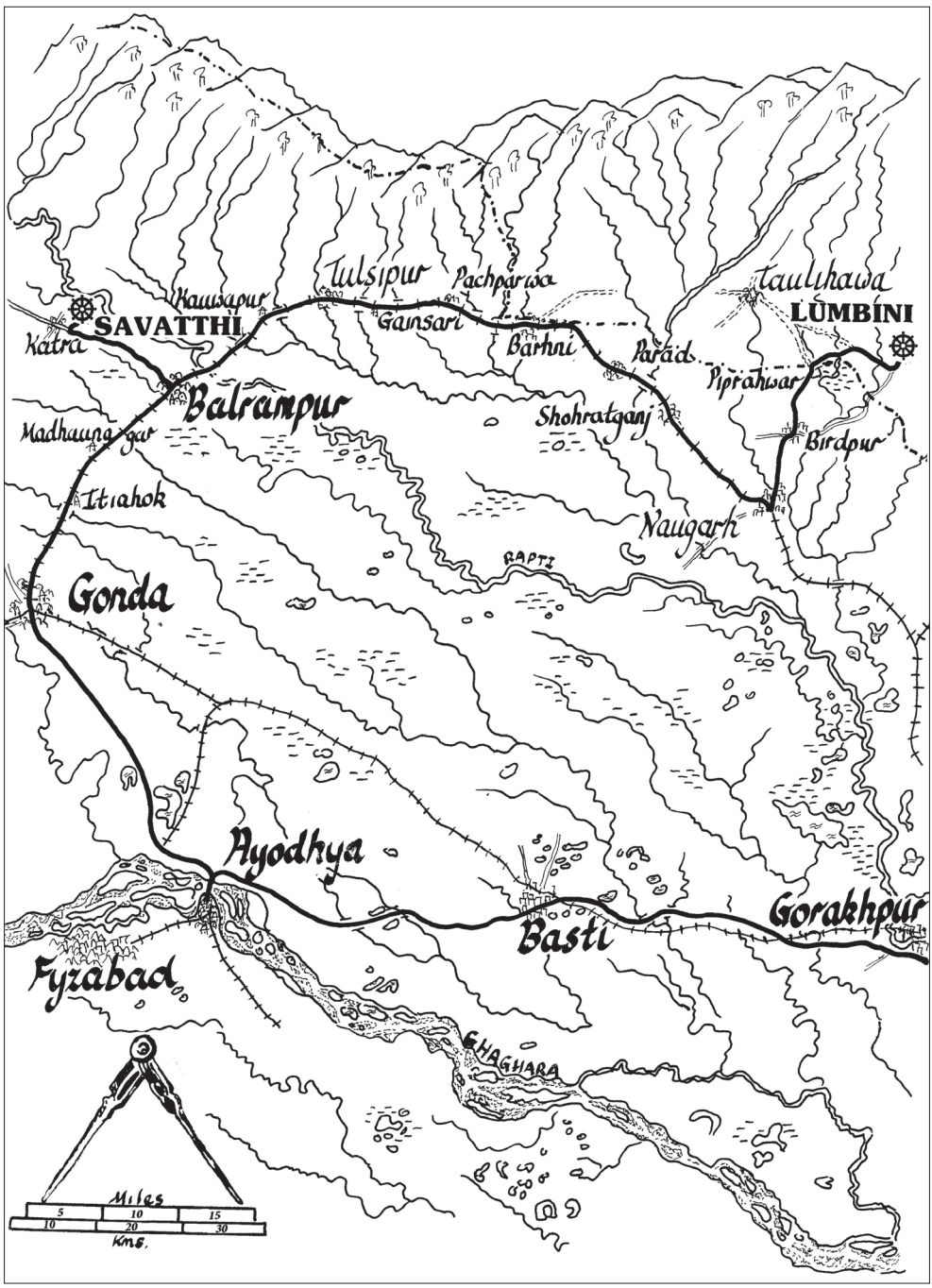
And when I realised what we all should know, think we know, but don't know, that "*this is another person*," something was crossed over, and the perceptions changed. My feeling for the man, and for whatever he had to carry deepened. India…life on the road…supporting a monk—what was he working his way through? I could try and help…and forget again. And in the course of that, empty a little more of my self into the Way It Is.

"When you write about this, Bhante, make sure you mention all my faults…." Actually it seems I have described my own even more accurately. But that's the humbling fact of this journey: we fare on in our own current, a stream that floods and saturates the world. And it is not always so grand. But any pilgrimage is not about aiming to arrive at a new world; the journey is to let go of all possible worlds. So we don't really go forwards but deeper, as if in a torrent that cuts down, exposing the bedrock of habits, assumptions, opinions, and wishes…and somehow keeps flowing on.

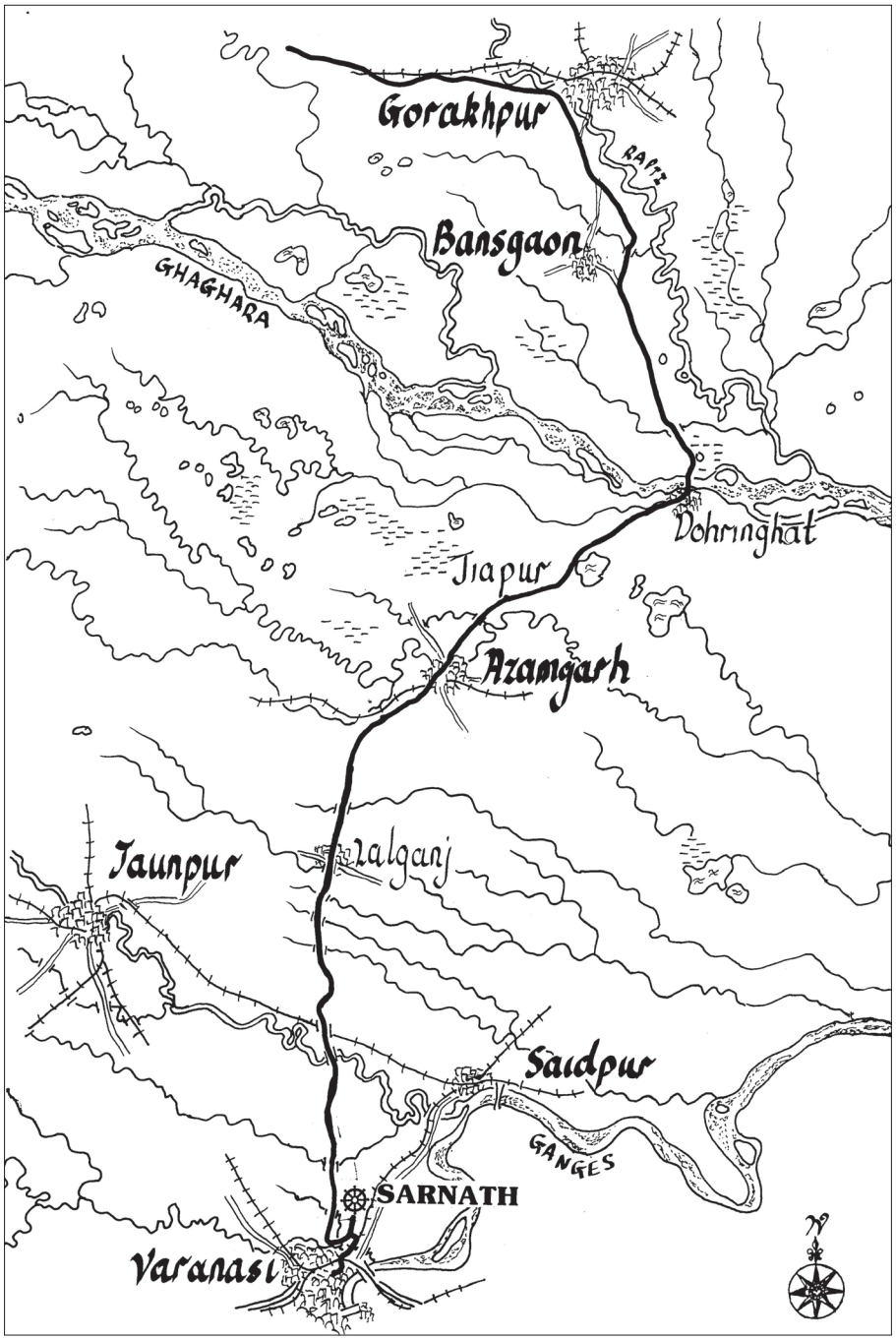
The Fifth Moon:

VARANASI TO LUMBINI





Mid Uttar Pradesh


Gorakhpur
RAPTI
Bansgaon
GHAGHARA
Dohringhat
Jiapur
Azamgarh
Jaunpur
Lalganj
Saidpur
GANGES
SARNATH
Varanasi
N



20

The Family Business

AJAHN SUCITTO

February 8th. If there's a right way to enter Varanasi, we surely found it: being rowed down the Ganges from Ramnagar on the eastern bank, across that broad brown flow strewn with garlands (and stuff that you didn't want to look at too closely) to the city that it makes holy. The silent boatman lent into his oars and the rowlocks creaked steadily. On the farther shore, crowded with *ghats* and temples, the pious came to be cleansed of sin, to spend their last moments on earth, or to have the ashes of their dead sprinkled. As we drew nearer we could see the stone steps that led down to the river thronging with people involved in ritual ablution; the burning *ghats*, where the dead are cremated, were further to the north and downstream. To have one's remains cast into the tide on the Varanasi shore guarantees re-birth in heaven; to die on the uninhabited banks immediately to the east, is, they say, to be reborn as a donkey. So for us lumbering out of the wilds and back to the civilised world, it was an auspicious crossing.

But we were crossing over too fast, much too fast! We wanted to treasure the time, enshrine that rare tranquil window onto the thronging involvement of India. We asked the boatman to stop while we chanted a

puja: he paused briefly, but in a matter of moments bent back to it again. He just wanted to get the crossing over and done with.

Here at least, I have the measure. Let's wait…pictures are easier to describe than flux. The little red diary sketches the romantic vision of the city, seen from a Shiva shrine in the Maharaja's palace on the Ramnagar shore. In one cramped page of tiny writing, we gazed over the broad sweep of the Ganges to the frontage of *ghats* and temples of varying vintage serrating the sky as they knelt along the western bank. Canaletto, and Turner, would have painted Varanasi from this quiet vantage; they knew well how a sheet of water could frame a city with reflective stillness. The pale greeny-bronze river's flank was spangled with the white specks of bathers wrapped in their best *dhotis* and saris; boats bobbing on her breast measured her rhythmic breathing; and the city under a clear blue heaven nuzzled up to Ganges like a calf to the udder. Here one of the fundamental images of the culture is portrayed: Mother Ganga receiving her multitudinous offspring, cleaning them of all impurity, and in death accepting their ashes into her heart.

Memory adds some background. We had pounded heavy-footed into Ramnagar late in the morning with not much time for a meal and sank into a *chai* shop of such surpassing filth that even the rats running around the floor looked embarrassed. The customers were served by bright-eyed boys who looked about eight, and whose thumbs regularly went for immersion in whatever runny dish they happened to be carrying. We chose plain *parothas*, huge ones, a forearm's length across, and bolted them down throats grown leathery from periodic searing. Then slowing down into a post-march, post-prandial, daze we headed for the river looking for a crossing, and happened across a massive fortified palace. A friendly brahmin told us it had belonged to the Maharaja of Benares and waved us in.

It was now state property, and the superintendent gave us only fifteen minutes to look around. "Lunch time is at one o'clock," he stated calmly but with some finality. It wasn't going to be easy to absorb the mood of

unhurried imperial grandeur in a quarter of an hour, but we felt it was our duty to gobble as much of it down as possible. The diary splutters indignantly, in an attempt to savour every morsel of that labyrinthine splendour: "old Belgian Minerva car, palanquins, pistols, rifles, swords, ivories, ceramics, brocades, textiles, photos of former and current maharaja (plus Brits in pith helmets awkwardly trying to sit cross-legged, or visiting monarchs, e.g., Haile Selassi)." A carefully constructed guide book would paint the vision with more taste and grace but miss out the Pollock-like impasto. Breugel on the other hand would have noted the sleeping attendant outside the palace's temple, waking to hold his hand out as we left. In fact he would probably have set up his easel in the *chai* shop and painted the whole scene from there.

Outside, the brahmin arranged a ferry across the river. "It will cost seventy-five rupees." We gave the money to a boatman, who rowed us about thirty metres along the waterfront to a smaller, shabbier boat, containing a smaller, shabbier boatman. A brief dialogue ensued that entailed us being transferred downmarket; it would be interesting to know how the seventy-five rupees got divided between the three of them. But that's business, and Varanasi has always been about business, before there were temples and stone steps leading down to the water, long before what we now call "Hinduism" with its images and gods became the order of the day. Certainly the city was well established in the time of the Buddha as a centre for the production of fine muslin and brocades, and as the capital of Kasi, a kingdom that had just been assimilated into Kosala. And by that time, the important religious business of fire worship and ritual immersion was a well-established means of livelihood for the local brahmin priests. They probably wouldn't have welcomed the competition that a *samana* introduced, particularly one who denied the efficacy of ablution and fire worship and opposed blood sacrifice and the taboos of caste. Bent on pointing to a liberation that could be achieved by an individual within themselves "in no great length of time," the Buddha moved on north to the Deer Park outside the

city, modern Sarnath. But even he was eventually dragged back (posthumously) to Vedic sanctity. In 1794, when Jagat Singh, minister to the maharaja, had the ancient Buddhist *stupa* at nearby Sarnath demolished for the sake of its brickwork, the ashes of Gotama the Buddha were discovered in it. Anxious that his fellow countryman should at last find his way to heaven, the good man had them thrown into the Ganges.

As we were pulling up at the *ghat*, a festive procession greeted us, garlanded with flowers and salutations of "*Namaste*, *baksheesh*!" We passed through that and got moving, away from the steps that led into the water and into the dense tangle of capillary-like alleys that make up the Chowk. The Chowk is the network through which the whole city, extending back north and west to a bustling mercantile sprawl with a (formerly British) cantonment of "upper class" houses, and south to the Sanskrit university, connects to the Ganges. Through its choked passages moves whatever daily blessing has been generated by means of ritual sacrifice and ablution. But the Chowk is as much, or more, a bazaar as the religious core. It is predominantly a mass of tiny shops most commonly selling beads, satin, and perfumes. Sandalwood, the universal incense, pervades the air, and "Hello—change money?" softly drifts into the ear from an unidentified space just to one side of your vision. Meanwhile through the press of bodies in the alleys, temples can be glimpsed—behind the shop frontage yet amongst them, like the Hindu gods themselves.

The teeming chaos of the place is sanctified by being dedicated to Shiva in his fertility aspect as Vishweswara "God of All" or Vishwanatha "Lord of All." The god first appears under the name Rudra, "the howler," in the Veda Samhita, and in the later Upanishads was addressed as a manifestation of the supreme, with many names, including that of Shiva. The epics mention him with honour, and in the collections of legends and stories known as Puranas, the god acquires a massive, though apparently contradictory, potency. An ascetic, a solitary yogi meditating high in the Himalayas, reluctant to marry Parvati the daughter of

the mountain, Shiva is a source of fertility and blessing and at the same time Bhairava "the terrible destroyer," whose *tandava* dance brings the world to its close.

And he is also Gangadhara, the bearer of the Ganges. She was a river of heaven once, streaming from Vishnu's toe. According to the Puranas, it was only through the power of the sage Bhagiratha that she was brought down from above. She didn't want to come at all, and was angry, very angry, at being pulled by his power down to the earth realm. Thousands of miles she fell, and there was fear that the power of her descent would crush the earth. Then the Shiva came forward to catch her on his brow, so that she flowed to the earth through his piled-up hair; and, carrying the accumulated power of all that sacrifice and devotion, the flowing stream became the Mother of the World.

Now holy places and people by the million cling to her. Near her source in the mountains at Rishikesh, or at Hardwar, there are scores of ashrams where near-naked sadhus, hair matted or bound into top-knots and bodies smeared with ash, undertake austerities. The power of their offering themselves to God is galvanising. Every twelve years (according to astrological calculations) at Hardwar or at Allahabad, where the Ganges and the Jumna meet and are joined by the heavenly (and invisible) river Sarasvati, there is the mass gathering known as the Kumbh Mela. Fifteen million people will gather beside the river for immersion; and at auspicious moments in unstoppable surges that leave a few hundred trampled underfoot, plunge into the sacred tide.

In the Chowk it's hardly like being in a city. The experience is more archetypal; one is in the press of birth and death. The very sky is all but blotted out by the torrent of the manyfolk. Yet there is a current, and as much through its agency as through our own efforts, we passed through—and into the clotted arteries of the major thoroughfares, where at least the sky could be seen. Somewhere in this fertile flood, bearing Sikhs and sadhus and everyone in between, carrying cows, rickshaws, scooters, and honking cars, slowly onwards, was the post office.

And beyond that, Clark's Hotel. The first would offer us the emotional uplift of letters from family and friends, and beyond that Mr. Upadhyay would regale us with food, drink, and running water. And somewhere, surely, would be the chance to rest, to shelter from the elements and make running repairs on bodies and belongings.

So stopping off here and there for supplies, we let go into the shifting purgatory of the street. In a shop on the way, Nick bought some cloth for me to use in modifying my bag. The zip on the top had given up, and I intended to replace it with a drawstring and a flap that I could tie down. His bag needed some fixing too: its handles, designed only for hand-holding, were coming off under the strain of having Nick's arms thrust through them as he wore it knapsack-style. His method of packing was to wrap the sooty cooking pot in a plastic bag and then force everything else—shirt, tea, maps, candles, biscuits, etc., in at random. As the bag stretched beyond its limits and couldn't close its mouth, he would squash it down and kneel on it to get the contents compressed. Sometimes it would take the two of us holding the unwilling victim down to force the zip to close.

In short it was getting the same treatment that India doles out to its long-suffering vehicles, and to its gasping cities. As is characteristic of the species, Varanasi's body rhythms fluctuate between spasms of festivals and riots, and seizures of near paralytic congestion. In the city it's easy to see the connection between fertility, birth, and death; where reproduction becomes a religious principle, overcrowding and destitution are inevitable consequences. Huge yellow billboards advocating birth control may smile down from the main thoroughfares, but the family business is too deeply ingrained. The need to make favourable connections via marriage, and the urge to produce children to increase the commodity of kindred, are underlined by the tenet that one will not enter heaven unless one has produced a son. Though the earth groans "too much, too much," Shiva dances his birth-death dance, and Mother Ganga flows on, bearing yet more garlands, excrement, and ashes.

NICK

Varanasi was the biggest disappointment of the pilgrimage. Other experiences had been a lot worse, but I had not been expecting anything of them. It was the two weeks of pleasant walking getting there, during which I had come to envisage Varanasi as magical. The reality that slowly dawned as we pushed our way along the Chowk was that it was crowded, filthy, and ugly. Everyone seemed to be rude and on the make.

We collected our mail from the post office and fled in a motor rickshaw to Clark's Hotel. But Mr. Upadhyay—of the motorbike, Tibetan Buddhism, and "when you come to Varanasi you must look me up"—was not there, and another dream we had carried was deflated. So we clambered back into the same motor rickshaw—waiting on the off chance round the corner—and took it to the mundane and un-magical Burmese Buddhist Vihara.

The *vihara* used to be the place to stay in Varanasi when I was last in India. There was always an interesting collection of long-term travellers there, stopping off for a while from their perambulations about the sub-continent: the spiritually inclined, full of the ashram in Rishikesh they had just been staying in and swapping stories of gurus and their miraculous doings, and the more hedonistic, passing through on their annual migration between the Himalayas and their wintering grounds on the beaches of Goa. I think everyone used the *vihara* because it was so cheap. In those days we could stay in India as long as we wanted, the only restriction being how long we could make our money last. There were many who had been there years and for whom the money had completely run out. They were surviving by doing drug deals, selling their passports or picking up bits of work; one of the favourites was working as extras for the Bombay film industry—though you couldn't have long hair or beards for that.

Things had changed at the Burmese Vihara. The place still looked the same—it was behind the municipal bus station and, like it, had a func-

tional brick and concrete block architecture. But there was only one other traveller while we were there, a lady on her way from a Goenka meditation course who had stopped for one night before heading on to Kathmandhu. All the other Westerners in Varanasi were staying in the more expensive little hotels overlooking the *ghats*. In the old days that was where those we dismissed as "tourists" used to stay, but that was the only kind of traveller there seemed to be now.

There was just one bhikkhu there, and he was only in Varanasi for six months studying at the university. The *vihara* was run by a young man employed as the manager, and he told me they were having real trouble making ends meet. There had been no Burmese pilgrims since Burma's borders closed in the 1960s, and now there were few Westerners. They had tried pleading to the Burmese government for help, but they did not hold out much hope. The only way they had of supplementing their income was hiring the *vihara* out for wedding functions. They did not like doing it—Hindu wedding ceremonies were hardly what a Buddhist pilgrims' resthouse was meant for—but there was nothing else.

The family for the next wedding arrived the same day as us; soon after we settled in there was a lot of commotion outside, and we were disturbed by various people walking into our room, presumably looking around at the facilities they had hired. The wedding was not taking place for two days but there was a lot of preparation to be done. They started on the *vihara* in earnest the next morning, but I missed that as I had gone to get our visas replaced at the foreigner's registration department. Visas were how India had dealt with all the money-less young Westerners of the 1960s and early 1970s, the kind of people that used to stay at the *vihara*. Now everyone had to have one, and they were limited to six months.

I had suspected when the official in Calcutta had said we could replace our lost visas in Varanasi that it was only a way of passing the problem on. I was right—in Varanasi they passed us on to New Delhi. We must go there if we wanted to get a new visa, and I was warned that it would take several weeks.

By my return the wedding preparations were well under way. Young men were balancing on ladders and stringing lines of electric fairy lights between the buildings. They were also covering everything with silver tinsel: it was twisted onto the fairy light cables, strung along the face of the buildings, hung from every available projection, and it covered a new large bamboo arch across the entrance. Meanwhile at the back of the compound women were preparing vast quantities of food. A row of ovens had been built from clay and bricks, and there was a big pile of wood with which to feed them. The young manager had moved us from our original ground-floor room to one on the upper floor in an adjacent building. Presumably this was an attempt to give us some privacy, but from the scale of the preparations for a wedding that was not until the following night, we were beginning to realise that it was something we were not going to be able to ignore, wherever we were.

AJAHN SUCITTO

After a rest in the *vihara*, I got down to washing our things, and more sewing. However holy the place, most human activity is about maintaining domestic standards. The manager gave us a room and let me use the phone to attempt to contact Mr. Upadhyay. Things came together: wide-hipped matriarchs who were preparing for the wedding happily filled my bowl; Nick did his shopping and even took us out for a meal as a treat.

Domestic duties like filling in the diary and writing letters also helped create some inner cohesion. I had kept up a steady outpouring of minor epics to my families—my brother and mother on one side, and the *sangha* in various monasteries on the other. Varanasi was the principal address that I had given to pick up incoming mail, and to my delight I received quite a bit. Monks and nuns had sent me their best wishes, and a replacement copy of the Patimokkha. Separate worlds hovered nearer—even my brother, no great correspondent, had written. I opened his letter

nervously; what news of my mother? It was quite a long letter, and the relief I felt at the end of it made it clear how much had been nagging away in the back of my mind. He described the situation that I was familiar with before I left: she had various bowel disorders, and was also having memory losses. On my last visit, I noticed her obsession with recording the time, to keep a sense of connection to events. Even then, my brother had been with her nearly every day, doing odd jobs, washing clothes, and keeping her company; and he had hired a home help to come round to do her washing, cook, cut her hair, and whatever else. Since November, mother's condition had deteriorated, and my brother felt that it was better to find her a place where there would be twenty-four-hour attendance. He was writing to let me know, so that my mind would be at rest, that she had finally settled into a retirement home.

I felt proud of him; he was using family life to do a lot of good things. My life of contemplation and non-attachment, though an inspiration to many people, had never seemed to be of much interest to my own family. When I first returned to England from Thailand, I'd really wanted to offer my family something enriching from my experience; but all they seemed to notice was the renunciation, the awkwardness of not eating after noon, the anti-social abstinence from social drinking and watching television. To my mother at least, bhikkhu life was an avoidance of life, a meaningless sacrifice. But I kept the connection…maybe the letters from India, in which watered-down Buddhist reflections could be slipped into descriptions of events and scenery, would have a subliminal effect.

A lot of religion is just about dealing with the sense of belonging, the pain and joy of that. Theistic explanations often try to fit it all together by taking us back to grander versions of Father or Mother who will gather us back into eternity. But in India the picture is vaster and more detailed than any family dynamic. All creation is governed by *dharma*—which covers the rhythms that bring worlds into being and brings them to an end, the vows that bind the deities, the various roles and functions of the castes, and even the minutiae of religious procedure and social pro-

tocol. And at every level there are rituals, formulae, and sacred words to ensure that the great balance of *dharma* is maintained.

Hence the Vedas, the collections of the Word, which are considered too sacred for the lower castes to even hear. For them, there are the tales of the gods and of heroes—the Puranas and the Itihasas. The Vedas, the hymns, teachings, rituals, and procedures of sacrifice and purification are the business of the brahmin priests. According to the Veda, it is correct sacrifice, or the self-sacrifice of renunciation, that grants the greatest power for success. And the learned brahmins are those best suited to conduct ritual sacrifice on behalf of those who cannot sacrifice themselves through celibacy or asceticism. Referred to in the texts as "the human gods," the brahmins summon and manipulate the gods' power through sacred word and ritual. The human need for blessing, for safe passage through the poignant throes of birth and death, has been their affair for millennia. And the *ghats* at Varanasi, on the banks of the sacred river, are of course one of the most auspicious places to have such needs addressed.

So, without much conviction, but with a vague determination to do the Varanasi thing right, we decided to begin our second full day in the city by the river. We would get to the *ghats* before dawn, swathed in robes and blankets so that in the dim light we would not be noticed as Westerners. We left the *vihara* at 4:30 and began by walking; the streets were quiet, but Nick knew we wouldn't have to walk the three kilometres to the river. We avoided the rickshaws by the bus station: "Better to take a ride when you're walking—gives you a psychological advantage when it comes to haggling a price." After about five minutes of displays of complete indifference to a motor rickshaw, the price eventually dropped to an acceptable level—"OK five rupees. OK?" We clambered aboard and made it to the *ghats* by 5:00.

On the steps that led down to the water were a few stalls where vendors were already arranging pots of pigment and garlands of flowers. It was the cold time of day in the cold season, but as dawn came up,

a few men and women swathed in white came down to bathe. Some were, to judge by the intensity of their manner, visiting pilgrims making a very special event of it. The vendors gave them a lot of attention: apart from garlands, the pilgrims could also have a mantra recited (for a fee). Then they descended the steps into the water to about waist depth. Turning clockwise three times and with one hand holding the nostrils, they ducked beneath the soupy surface. Other arrivals treated the whole thing more casually, chatting briefly to the vendors before rolling up their *dhotis* and standing ankle-deep to imbibe a mouthful of Ganges; they must have been city dwellers on their way to work.

Now and then a quarrel would break out among rival vendors subsiding only when customers came by. We sat back and had tea and chatted with some of the mystically inclined Westerners, the latest in the long tradition of those who await the sun's rising over the river. This has been a sacred moment since time immemorial. The Gayatri, the verse to the god of the rising sun form the holiest words in the Veda:

Let us think on the lovely splendour
of the god Savitri
that he may inspire our minds.

Arousal, fertility—the transmission between god and mind. A dazzling sliver widened in the east as the temple bells rang their response in many voices, and Savitri—"the life-giver"—reached fiery fingers across the water and pulled himself on top of Ganga. He burned there, gloriously impregnating every ripple, for a few mind-moments before, paler in a whitening sky and with almost indecent haste, continuing his ascent over the prosaic round.

After Turner, back to Breugel; the romance was over and the *ghats* began to fill up. Day's business had begun.

As the bustle increased and parties of tourists arrived for boat excursions, we started thinking of breakfast. We made our way through

alleys, which were coming to life but not yet crowded: a beggar squatting beside his aluminium dish; a vagrant cow; stone *lingams* and small shrines in nooks and crannies; the usual wodge of leaves, paper, and household detritus underfoot; and a straggling tree climbing to the narrow band of the sky. Occasionally, where a door in the frontage had been left open, a temple interior was revealed. Maybe we could enter the Golden Temple where the sacred *lingam* was worshipped! But it was not to be: Varanasi is one place where non-Hindus are not allowed access to temples. The best we were offered was a chance to see the outside from a neighbouring house (for five rupees). We didn't buy it. I could understand the devotees not wanting to be gaped at by tourists: participation is all, and perhaps for us novices, immersion in Indian daily life was devotion enough. Moreover, regarding fertility ritual and sacrifice, we didn't need to go far to witness, and even be part of that.

Back at the *vihara*, things were livening up as the preparations for the wedding escalated. They were testing out the P.A. with snatches of Indian pop songs. "Will that be playing tape cassettes all night?" I inquired casually. "Oh no, not all night," I was reassured. "The band will play for the first part of the evening." I looked at maps of the city, but came up with no leads on where we could spend a quiet evening's meditation. I managed to eventually contact Mr. Upadhyay on the phone: he was delighted but busy. Tramping around the hectic streets on the off-chance seemed worse than staying with the situation we had arrived at. We might as well open up to it.

NICK

By now there was a large marquee near the entrance and a smaller one beyond the main hall, both of which were being decked out with flowers. As I was walking round looking at this activity, a well-dressed man came up. He was, he told me with some solemnity, "the father-in-law of the sister of the bride" and from New Delhi. He explained that it was

the bride's extended family who were doing all the preparations around us. They were here to help out the bride's mother, a recent widow. "She is inviting four hundred guests and spending over two *lakh* rupee, as well as the dowry of one *lakh* rupee." A *lakh* rupee was five thousand pounds, and to an Indian middle-class family such as this, that was a lot of money. It is because daughters can cost so much that India has a sex ratio that has been skewed by female infanticide to eight females for every ten males.

In India, courtship is between families, not individuals. My new companion, who knew both families, had been the intermediary. The bride's family had to make the first approach and then together the families had consulted the astrologers: "There are thirty-two different aspects of their star signs that must be considered." The matching of the astrological charts is in addition to the matching already done on the material plane. In this case the families not only came from the same caste and sub-caste, but they were distantly related and even had the same family name, Kannadam.

"This young couple are both twenty-one, which is not right. It is tradition here for the bride to be the older." He conceded, however, that the tradition was something which dated from his days when couples were married much younger—a boy of eleven or twelve would get a wife of fifteen, who, in their first years together, would help bring him up. To be eligible nowadays, a middle-class boy first had to have a degree. So now the matching included degrees—if the boy had one then the girl must have one too, and from an institution of equivalent status. The groom at this wedding had just received his law degree and the bride a degree in business administration. According to my guide, the older age of modern brides caused other problems. "Before, when they were younger, they could be moulded by their new family." Now they were old enough to think for themselves.

Our conversation was interrupted by the spluttering into life of the loudspeakers. The high-pitched wailing of Indian pop songs filled the

courtyard and, as I took my leave, my companion invited us to join them. "You must certainly come; it will be a very great honour for the family." That night, February 7th, was supposed to be our half-moon meditation vigil spent by the Ganges, but his invitation changed that. We decided instead to stay at the *vihara* and try, somehow, to do it there.

It was a strange night. For much of it we clung to the raft of the small shrine in our room, washed over by waves of noise, occasionally venturing out to take part in the slightly surreal events happening below us. First there was the preparation of the bride, which took place in the smaller marquee. When I looked in, she was crouched forward under a canopy of marigolds, holding flowers and rice in her cupped hands as the women of her extended family mumbled and waved things about her and blessed her with little kisses to her feet, shoulders, and head. Two brahmin priests lounged on a thick woven carpet to one side looking on impassively. One was middle-aged and Westernised, the other old and plump with long white hair and a flowing beard. The groom arrived an hour later. From out on our balcony all I could see was a lot of milling bodies beyond the entrance archway. I managed to resist the temptation to go down to take a look—that is, until I heard the sound of a Dixieland jazz band.

I got to the entrance just in time to see an amazing procession, which appeared to be leaving. At the head was a carriage drawn by two scrawny horses decked out with elaborate plumes of imitation feathers and long tassels. In it was the groom and his two younger brothers, and sauntering along behind were the rest of the men from his extended family, more than fifty of them. I was told they had all just arrived by coach and were now leaving so they could arrive again in more traditional style. The empty street was lit up by lurid green and flashing red lights, which somehow marched along beside them, and the stark buildings reverberated with bangs and discordant music. As well as the New Orleans jazz band, which played atrociously, there were traditional reed-pipes playing a long wailing dirge, supported by stuttering *tablas,* and at the

head, someone was letting off elaborate, and sometimes stunning, fireworks. They marched down to the corner and disappeared around it. The music came to a ragged stop, and after a brief lull, it started up again and the procession reappeared, now marching back.

As they came nearer I could see in the darkness ahead of the procession two cycle rickshaws being pushed by men in the tattered off-white garb of labourers. Each rickshaw contained a generator, sparking furiously, with cables leading back to several sets of lights bobbing along either side of the procession. The sets of lights each had two fluorescent green strip lights forking upwards from a circular base, around which chased the flash of red bulbs. That was easy to work out, but I had to peer hard into the gloom under them to see what was moving them. Each circular board was balanced on a head of the poorest of the poor: an old man, several women, one with a baby strapped to her front, and children—all of them dressed in rags.

At the entrance the procession halted and the brass band stepped forward into the light wearing an assortment of frayed red and off-red uniforms. They played with a new fury as the groom's carriage then edged into the yard and his family assembled around it. Five of the band had tubas, and they, with a drummer, were playing a discordant chorus, which alternated with solos from a trumpet, clarinet, and another tuba. The soloists played at the same time, in true New Orleans jazz style, but what they were producing sounded more like three badly played Indian pop tunes. Meanwhile the traditional musicians assembled on the other side of the entrance arch and started banging and wailing. To the accompaniment of the resulting cacophony, the groom's family came forward to be welcomed by the men from the bride's family. The important members, at the front, bent forward to receive fat garlands of marigolds; the rest got button-hole roses fixed to the lapels of their Western-style suits.

Then with another surge in the noise, the groom's carriage again advanced for the groom to be welcomed by the women folk. They

swarmed around him performing little ceremonies, rubbing his face with things, twirling hands and objects about him, and mumbling incantations. The groom, who was wearing a Western-style suit and a bright yellow brocaded turban with a plume and a veil of garlanded flowers, looked extremely uncomfortable—and distinctly unhappy.

In fact no one looked happy. That was the real difference from a wedding at home—how glum everyone looked. When we went into the larger marquee to await the bride, the groom sitting on one of two thrones bedecked in marigolds facing us was staring rigidly ahead, while the men folk of both families sat in rows of chairs looking downcast. Indian weddings are a serious business. They are about caste and family, not romance. The waiting groom and his family had never actually seen the bride before, only the photograph sent with her résumé. The bride's family hadn't even seen a photograph; but then they knew that the groom would shortly qualify as a lawyer, which was much more important than how he looked.

When the bride did enter, the formal red and gold sari she was wearing was so stiff that she had to be guided like a life-sized doll by two women from her family. They escorted her to the front and helped her onto her throne while she looked down all the while at the floor and the groom continued staring gloomily ahead. Their stiff manner, the gorgeous materials worn by the bride, the elaborate head-dress of the groom, and the bright yellow-flowered thrones made them look like Indian versions of Barbie and Ken dolls. Manned by their respective family members, they exchanged big garlands of flowers, still neither looking at the other. Then various combinations of every relative filed up for photographs and videos with them. Even I, "Mr. John, Mr. John, you must come," got tugged up.

We did not get to see the actual wedding ceremony; that took place after the meal at one in the morning, a time specified, as was the date, by the astrologers. By then we were trying to sleep, despite the continuing noise, which later included a long contribution from some young

boys trying to play a *tabla* beneath our room. Sleep was fitful and both of us got up in the night, Ajahn Sucitto at 2:30 when he saw the couple looking more relaxed and sitting beneath our room surrounded by their families, and I at about four, when I went for a walk and found the older priest chanting to a group of relatives in the smaller marquee.

In the morning there was a large relaxed breakfast, "not part of the ceremony but necessary to keep the bodies functioning," for everyone, including us, the young manager, and the resident monk. Then finally, with the imminent departure of the groom's family coach, full of presents, there was the leave-taking. The bride's immediate family and the bride herself were in floods of tears and wailing, and her mother collapsed fainting on the floor to be revived with a bowl of water thrown on her face.

I spent the rest of the morning, while everything was being taken down and packed away, recovering and filling two aerogrammes with dense writing describing the wedding to my mum—I knew she would love it.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Early in the morning, a little after the brahmins had completed their rituals, I was invited down into their tent to give my blessing to the newlyweds. I felt sympathetic to it all. The family had gone to a lot of trouble to seek out what they thought, from the collective of their own experience, would be for the welfare of their children. There was some wisdom in that: marriage based in romance expects a permanent love affair, an endless glowing sunrise, and too often ends in bitterness and wounding. If you're going to do it, you'd better know it's about sacrifice. Seeing it in religious terms, and having experienced friends to turn to, is realism not decoration. Now that they had relaxed, the couple seemed quite happy, and it was easy to wish them well. The obvious thing to chant was the *Mangala Sutta*, though I didn't explain it in detail. The brahmins looked on in a non-committal way.

Being endowed with craft and learning,
having cultivated self-discipline,
with speech that is well spoken:
this is the highest blessing.

To cherish and support mother and father,
and children, husband, or wife,
to engage in work that is not harmful:
this is the highest blessing.

Ardent devotion to the spiritual life,
clear insight into the four noble truths
and realisation of nibbana:
this is the highest blessing.

Though living in the world,
one's heart is perfectly unshakeable,
beyond sorrow, confusion, and need:
this is the highest blessing.

After that was the breakfast feast, in a great marquee decorated with tinsel set up beside the temple building, full of sleepily festive people. Inside, long tables covered with white cloth received family, friends, relatives, and anybody around. Nick and I took our places as large fluffy *puris* and pots of vegetables and basins of sticky *halvah* laced with cashew nuts came round, accompanied by tea in huge kettles. "Uncle" bustled to and fro making sure that everyone was catered to; the women were involved in animated chatter, with a few dabbing their eyes. Some members of the venerable band were even still around, buttons undone and red jackets open to accommodate the banquet. Though bodies swelled and sleepy heads tried to refuse, round and round the pots went, with more food. It was all very traditional for family occasions—a bit too much.

Perhaps it was after a revel like this in Varanasi that the Buddha received his first convert from family life. Yasa, the son of a leading merchant, had fallen asleep at the feast. He woke up in the small hours of the morning and saw the lovely female musicians also asleep in a post-party shambles: the hair of one had come undone, another was dribbling, others were muttering. To him, it seemed like a charnel ground. Sick at heart, he cried out: "It is fearful, it is horrible!" and ran that very night to where the Buddha was living in the Deer Park. The Buddha gave him a graduated teaching. Of course when Yasa's mother found him gone, she raised the roof, and father was roused into action. Messengers were sent forth while the merchant himself made his way to the Deer Park. Meeting him, the Buddha also taught the merchant, who while not in the same state of mind as his son, was still impressed enough by the Dhamma to ask to be considered as one of the Master's disciples. After that, it was easy for the Buddha to convince the merchant that having penetrated his Dhamma fully, his son was no longer interested in worldly pursuits. The father had enough faith and pragmatic wisdom to invite the Buddha and Yasa to his house for a meal. Yasa, his mind free from attachments, right then and there asked to "go forth" into the bhikkhu *sangha*. Through him, four of his friends from the leading merchant families of Varanasi also went to the Buddha, received teachings, and left the household life as bhikkhus, followed by fifty more from the neighbouring countryside.

> *Therefore hold nothing as dear; for separation from the dear is painful. There are no bonds for them who have nothing beloved nor unloved.*

The going forth represented upheaval in many ways. For the individual, in a culture that so emphasised the *dharma* of caste and clan, it was like dropping out of the known world. Even though their sons (and daughters) might have been enlightened by it, having them leave the world of business, property, and family rarely received a joyful

response from the parents. Hadn't one of Gotama's disciples—a slave girl's daughter no less!—told a brahmin that if the rivers were capable of conferring sanctity, then all the fishes and crocodiles would be bound for heaven? And that if rivers could wash away the effects of bad deeds, they could wash away the effects of good deeds too? The "samana Gotama" was bringing not only destitution but also blasphemy into the society. So, generally, strenuous attempts would be made to prevent the going forth or to lure the prodigals back to the fold. At best there was a regretful aquiescence.

Sometimes it's only in the context of your own family that you get to hear and consider how the separation can feel to those left behind. It was in his home town of Kapilavatthu, after drawing away his own son and his half-brother, that the Buddha heard the plea of his father:

> *Love for our children, Lord, cuts into the outer skin; having cut into the outer skin, it cuts into the inner skin…it cuts into the flesh…into the sinews…into the bones; having cut into the bones, it reaches the marrow and stays there. Lord it would be good if the venerable ones did not give the going forth without the parents' consent.*

The Buddha agreed. For those who wish to go forth, the son or daughter has to have the parents' consent; the husband the wife's, and vice versa. It's not to be a rejection but a sacred thing, a mutual and conscious sacrifice.

The day after the wedding was as quiet a day as it ever could be in Varanasi. We both felt pretty rough, but staying around in the *vihara* was not going to make things better. Mr. Upadhyay came round later in the morning with a bag of oranges. I wanted to give him some teachings, but he couldn't stay long. Also he couldn't receive us at his home because his in-laws were visiting for a few days, but maybe tonight we would like to go out on a boat on the river? He would take us to the burning *ghats*, a very impressive spectacle. We agreed, but knowing the way things are, invited him to meet us in Sarnath if for family reasons

he couldn't make it. Sarnath, peaceful Buddhist Sarnath, was where we belonged. So when by the next day, February 9th, we hadn't heard from Mr. Upadhyay, we packed our patched-up bags (Nick's now had two dog collars riveted to it to carry his sleeping mat) and left.

But you don't get away from the world by walking. Sages know this; they left us this story:

Once when Shiva was meditating in his lone mountain abode, a ferocious demon who had just overpowered the other gods came to him, demanding that he hand over his consort, Parvati. Shiva's reply was to open his third eye; a lightning bolt flashed out, producing a lean, hungry monster who set upon the demon with every intention to devour him. The demon threw himself upon the god's mercy, a bargain was struck, and in a trice the other gods were restored. But what to do with the gnashing monster whose sole instinct was to eat? Shiva responded to its howls with the injunction that it should eat itself. And so it did: tail, legs, body, right up to the head, until there was just the face with the insatiable gnashing jaws. Shiva gazed at it in awe: it was the perfect image of what life was about. He called it Face of Glory, vowing that no one could leave the realm of birth and death who did not render it due honour.

To take leave of the world with reverence is not so easy, especially when it comes to leaving Varanasi. We started off about 8:00 A.M.; Sarnath wasn't far—8, 12, or 32 kilometres depending on which guide book you followed. The road was hellish: to the noise and congestion was added the stench of diesel exhaust from old engines. I was trying to stay spacious about it, but my stomach started rising. We spotted a railway line, banked above the level of the road, and chose that as the route out of nausea. No good. It was in frequent and historic use as a public latrine, with excrement splattered over the rails and piled on the sleepers. We scurried along gagging, until Nick found a way down to the Varuna River, and the vista of green fields and clean air opened up. However, Shiva's "Face of Glory" had got here first. Alongside the river was the place where the dead cows and oxen were dumped. The stench of rot-

ting flesh saturated the warm heavy air, and blue flies buzzed around us as we made our way past corpse after corpse. Only with some reluctance, like city gents at a railway station being asked to move out of the way of the cleaners, did the heavy vultures flop and flap out of our path, on their tattered black wings. I suppose it took us an hour and a half to get to Sarnath, but it was long, much too long.



21

The Universal Duty

AJAHN SUCITTO

We were coming back into Buddha-land: Sarnath. The great Teacher had walked this way himself from Varanasi to give his core teachings to his five former colleagues, teachings that had illuminated the world since then. At Sarnath we could pay homage to the Buddha again.

Apparently the funny octagonal tower that we passed on the outskirts of the modern town sits on top of an ancient stupa that commemorates where that "group of five" had first caught sight of him. Though he'd sought them out for their welfare, they hadn't wanted to receive him. They'd revered him as their leader when he'd been the supreme ascetic, but he had then disillusioned them by "giving up the struggle" and reverting to the "luxury" of eating every day. "What if we don't greet him?" they thought when they saw him returning after his awakening at Bodh Gaya. But as he drew near, his majestic bearing, his ease, and his radiance got them to their feet despite themselves…one took his outer robe and his bowl, one prepared a seat, one set up water for washing his feet, a footstool, and a towel.

"Give ear, bhikkhus," said the Buddha, *"the deathless is found. I shall instruct you. I shall teach you the Dhamma."* They still tried to resist, but who could hold out against an awakened one? *"By practising as you are*

instructed you will, by realising it yourselves here and now through direct insight-knowledge, enter upon and abide in that supreme goal of the holy life for the sake of which men of good family rightly go forth from home to homelessness."

After passing the tower, the road took us past a wall over which peered a *naga*-crested roof. The Thai lettering emblazoned on the wall confirmed that this was Wat Thai, Sarnath. We stood still for a groggy moment in the warm sunshine. To have the space to do that, after the hurly-burly of Varanasi, felt like we had entered a sanctuary already. Then a smiling Thai bhikkhu appeared, and after making *anjali,* quietly took my bag off my shoulder and led us into the lodgings of the Wat—a clean, modern two-storey accommodation block arranged around a courtyard, with a dining hall outside. We were introduced to a small, rotund, and elderly bhikkhu who spattered a vigorous, rasping welcome as his quick eyes took us in. The abbot, Venerable Sasanarasmi, was obviously a man of action, and strangely enough for a Thai wat, Indian; but now wasn't the time for explanations. "I've been expecting you," he said, leading us into his room, where he burrowed around in a desk and dragged out the letter that I'd sent from Bodh Gaya. "Do you know where Venerable Nimalo is? He left his passport and ticket here. German." His voice sounded like shears going through aluminium sheeting—probably due to cigarettes, one of which was stubbed out in the ashtray. "Talk later. You must bathe, take some food, and have a rest."

I grew fond of him over the five days that we spent in Sarnath. He had the kind of sincerity and vigour that I had seen in Venerable Dharmapal, who we met in Calcutta; in fact they were associates, together forming the leadership of the All-India Bhikkhu Sangha. Attempting to organise and administer such an amorphous outfit must have taken unimaginable resources of fortitude and patience. But the abbot, though now in his seventies, was still richly endowed with those. He hailed from a low-caste background in Maharashtra state, had run away from home at the age of eight, become a *sadhu* at eighteen, then set up, and subse-

quently abandoned, his own business in his early twenties. Then, when the World Fellowship of Buddhists decided to have a symposium in Colombo in 1950, he had been approached to represent India. "So I agreed to take bhikkhu ordination and go to the conference. But I liked it, so I stayed in Sri Lanka for years, wandering, living on the beaches, always moving on…." As with Venerable Dharmapal, it wasn't always easy to get a solid biography, or even a long conversation. The nature of the man meant that even if he said "All I can do now is smoke and talk," he was much in demand, with his monks stopping in to his office to get some information, or a telephone ringing, or an appointment somewhere. We never did find out how he, an Indian, had managed to get so much support from Thailand to build the most commodious and well-appointed monastery in Sarnath, let alone acquire the Thai ecclesiastical title Phra Kru Sirivajaya. However, we did hear one day, as he was sitting in a chair in the courtyard, a précis of his early days at Sarnath, punctuated with stabs from a stubby finger.

"When I arrived, there was nothing here. This field was the latrine for the village. I hung my robe over a bamboo pole for a shelter and decided to stay—I had nothing. Then as I got support, the priest from the Hanuman temple tried to take over! Tried to get me thrown off—said it belonged to his temple! I had to fight for years."

He was used to fighting, this rubber bullet of a man with the rusty bayonet voice. The meal-times were conducted around his charming, humorous, but penetrating thrusts at visiting monks. "I know we should eat in silence—the proper way," he confessed to me, "But it's my one chance to attack their worldly habits." As a well-to-do Thai wat, the monastery naturally was a stop-off point for Thai tour buses and free-wheeling bhikkhus who were off on a jaunt to see the sights.

We would gather in the small monks' dining hall some time after 11 in the morning. Nick was invited in as my eight-precept companion; he would be at the back, while the bhikkhus all sat around a table, some with alms bowls, some using plates, with the food in the middle

of the table…waiting. The abbot would always be late and come striding in muttering high-speed apologies at about twenty past. The apologies would turn into some remarks in an Indian dialect to the Indian bhikkhus there, then (as he waved us to serve ourselves the food) into conversational remarks in Thai, then the formal meal-time reflection on the use of food. He didn't eat much himself but sporadically engaged one of the visiting Thai bhikkhus with a few questions. I couldn't understand the Thai but noticed the slightly defensive smiles—and the occasional chuckles from other parts of the table. It was all quite civilised yet enough to keep people on their toes.

But for me the first day was anything but sharp. I felt weak and undefined. That being nothing new, however, I tottered along behind Nick to the Deer Park with its ruins in the afternoon. That is, until the gated entrance to the park, where a familiar goddess arose in me with the unmistakable command to head for the nearest toilet, which was beside the gate. Shakily emerging from that, I was confronted by an attendant demanding one rupee for the use of the convenience. "No money!" "*Nahi paisa hai*!" I pondered momentarily whether this was tantamount to stealing, an expulsion offence. However I could hardly give anything back; so mentally determining to ask Nick to deal with the matter, I made it past the protesting attendant and collapsed back into the wat. The rest of the afternoon, the evening, and the greater part of the night were spent going through a rerun of the Calcutta purge with renewed vigour. So it wasn't until the next morning, February 10th it was, that I made my way shakily to the park, where over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha had "set the Dhamma wheel turning" by teaching the four noble truths to his five fellow *samanas*.

Within the park, apart from the cleanliness and serenity, the single most prominent feature was a *stupa*. It sat like a king on a throne, 30–40 metres high, feet spread over the earth—weathered and abused by history, but very solid, seemingly more definite, more stable even than the

earth beneath its feet or the sky around its head. I stood for a while gazing at it then circumambulated it in homage.

This *stupa,* the Dhammekh *stupa,* was the most substantial of all the remains in the Deer Park. From the Ashokan age through the Gupta period, there had been steady development of religious building. On the site where the Buddha instructed his five companions, another *stupa*, the Dhammarajika *stupa*, had been built and an Ashokan column erected next to it. After that, a temple had been constructed on the site of the small hut that the disciples built for the Master as his residence during that first rains retreat in Buddhist history. Those structures were all close together, about one hundred metres to the west of the Dhammekh *stupa*, but in nothing like the same condition. Hsuan Tsiang reported on the temple (known as Mulagandhakuti) as containing a life-size copper image of the Buddha when he came through; obviously *that* had gone a long time ago. Now the temple was just a space surrounded by a few low walls, and the column was just a stump. The "*stupa* to the King of the Law," originally similar in size to the Dhammekh, was a mere platform with a circle of foundation bricks on it. The Muslim raiders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had destroyed the temple and shattered the column. As for the remainder: when the Sangha had disappeared (it seems that the temples and monasteries on the site had been deliberately incinerated at some time) the ruins were up for grabs, and hunks of stone were used in building projects in Varanasi.

It was only the discovery of the Buddha's relics when the Dhammarajika *stupa* was demolished in 1794 that halted the process, by drawing British attention to Sarnath. Under the auspices of Sir Alexander Cunningham, investigation of the site proceeded in the first half of the nineteenth century, and although cartloads of unearthed statues still got hauled off for building works, much of what remained was preserved. That included the magnificent lion capital that had been on the top of the Ashokan column and later became the emblem of the independent

state of India. We saw it in the museum near the wat. Less regal, but more to the point, was another piece we saw there, a fragment of a stone parasol near the temple on which was still visible a section of the Buddha's first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*:

> *There are, bhikkhus, two extremes that should not be followed by one who has gone forth. Devotion to pursuing sense pleasure—which is low, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, and produces no useful result; and devotion to self-denial, which is painful, ignoble, and produces no useful result. Avoiding both these extremes, bhikkhus, the middle way that a Tathagata has awakened to gives vision and insight-knowlege and leads to peace, profound understanding, full realisation, and nibbana.*

Out of that first discourse, the Sangha was born. And here at least it felt like it was genuinely alive. The monastery seemed to be attuned to the *dharma* of *samana* life. The gesture of receiving me had been the first sign, but the quiet deportment of the resident monks—two Indians and two Thais— and their diligent attendance to *pujas* and study, gave me a feeling of being on solid ground. I asked about going out on alms round: yes, at least one of them did that every day, and they would be happy for me to go along…and would there be a Patimokkha recitation on the new moon, the 14th? Yes, that was their custom. And when they found out that I knew it, they seemed delighted at the possibility that I would chant it for them. So the days fell into a simple pattern: before dawn Nick and I would climb over the locked gates into the Deer Park and meditate there until the sun came up, then I'd walk around the park taking in the scene, then return to the Wat to practise chanting the Patimokkha for an hour or so. After that I'd take my bowl and go out for alms in the neighbourhood with Venerable Dhammasilo, one of the Indian bhikkhus; the locals were quite devoted to the monastery. After the meal, I would do some walking meditation, have a rest, and spend the rest of the day practising the Patimokkha, meditating, and complet-

ing the sewing jobs on my bag. It all felt so normal, like coming out of a weird dream; why weren't the other holy places all like this?

As I felt stronger and some interest in life began to return, the expeditions in the Deer Park lengthened. The northern boundary was a fenced-off area containing deer, and between that and the centre of the park were the ruins of a large monastery, built in the last days of Buddhism, when it was little more than an object of a few wealthy patrons' devotion. In that long twilight when the Ganges plain was being ravaged by Turkic raiders, the wife of the king of Kanauj (who was styled as an incarnation of Vishnu) had this place built. It couldn't have lasted long—the Islamic raiders were soon followed by the first Islamic state, the Delhi Sultanate, which dominated the Ganges valley in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Further east and past the Dhammekh *stupa*, the park extended to more recent constructions—notably the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, constructed under the auspices of the Maha Bodhi Society in 1931 for the use of pilgrims. The *vihara* pays tribute to the Buddha, of course—there are Buddha relics enshrined there, and the entire interior is covered with murals depicting scenes from the Master's life—but it is also a tribute to one of the people who brought Buddhism into public awareness at the beginning of the twentieth century. It owes its presence, and its international backing, to the almost indefatigable efforts of Anagarika Dharmapala, who spent most of his adult life struggling to have the Buddhist holy places of India returned to Buddhist hands. A Sri Lankan in the colonial era, Dharmapala had initially received support from (the American) Colonel Henry Olcott and (the Russian) Madame Blavatsky and represented Buddhism at the International Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. His numerous articles and crusading style matched his deliberately chosen name of "protector of the Dhamma." Outside the Mulagandhakuti Vihara where his ashes are interred, his statue stands arms folded, still collected in earnest thought.

Although mind-sets around the Buddha's Dhamma range between

the evangelical, the mystical, and the psychological, the principle teaching of the four noble truths is universal: "There is suffering: *dukkha*." Particularly when *dukkha* is understood as "unsatisfactoriness," this is something that everyone can relate to. Varying from wishing there were more of the nice bits, or that other people could have a better deal, to downright misery, there is an unsatisfactory taste to experience. We think that something has gone wrong rather than recognising that there's a cause we can address. "The origin of *dukkha* is to be abandoned": we could let go of the wanting that engenders dissatisfaction. "The stopping of dukkha can be realised": there can be a wish-less immediacy that opens us out of holding on. And "There is a path to that stopping": the middle way.

I knew the teachings. But someone who can exemplify them is a blessing on that path. And to find one of those seemed to take a lot of travelling.

NICK

It was the new moon the last day we were at Sarnath, and as Ajahn Sucitto was at a monastery he shaved his head. On the pilgrimage he had been doing it once every month, usually on the day before the full moon. He did it himself using a Chinese safety razor I bought him in Bodh Gaya, soaping his head and then scraping off lather and bits of black hair in long swathes. Despite a lack of mirrors he never cut himself. I supposed that was because he had been doing it for so long. In the monasteries in England, as in Thailand, they do it diligently twice a month, often shaving each other, but on the pilgrimage it was hard for him to get the hot water to do it that often. I never dared offer to help.

The other monks in the *vihara* also appeared with newly shiny heads, and in the afternoon they all met to recite the Patimokkha. I was pleased Ajahn Sucitto had finally found a monastic community whose Vinaya he could respect. The sloppy attitude of other bhikkhus had caused

him such heartache. And the respect was mutual: these monks were impressed with him, too, the young Indian bhikkhu who went on alms round with him palpably so. On the second day Ajahn Sucitto gave him the stainless steel alms bowl he was given in Bodh Gaya, swapping it for the young monk's much smaller and battered iron one. I could see from the way the young monk handled his new bowl how pleased he was. Although it made sense for Ajahn Sucitto to have a lighter and less attractive alms bowl, I'm certain he really did it as a confirmation of what they were doing at the wat.

While they were meeting for the Patimokkha, I was in the Deer Park. There I spotted Reverend Cuthbert, a Zen monk from Shasta Abbey in California we had met on Christopher Titmuss' retreat in Bodh Gaya. I couldn't really miss him, even amidst all the Tibetans around the *stupa*, for as well as his newly bald pink head bobbing above the sea of black Tibetan heads, there were also the robes. He had on his full regalia, a mauve cassock (the colour meant he was a *roshi*, or teacher) with a saffron *kesa* round his neck—a kind of pinafore that is a vestigial bhikkhu's robe, shrunk to a square foot but still made up of small pieces of cloth in the same basic pattern. When I went over to greet him, I found he had just arrived and was staying at the Maha Bodhi Society's *vihara*.

We chatted and exchanged news of our two traditions, of a branch of his monastery I knew in Northumberland and an off shoot of our tradition being planted in California. We marvelled at how international Buddhism now was. While the founder of his American monastery was an English woman who had trained in a Soto Zen monastery in Japan, our English Forest tradition was established by an American who had trained in Thailand. Both traditions now attracted people from everywhere; in England they have recently come from Russia, Israel, Zimbabwe, and El Salvador. Buddhism has circled the planet.

There was the same sense of internationalism with the Buddhist monks at the holy places. For me, used to just one tradition, there was such a bewildering variety. From Tibetan monks with their maroon and

yellow tops and wide maroon skirts, through Korean Zen monks in grey floppy pajama-like robes, to Chinese monks from Malaysia or Taiwan in dark robes with brightly coloured wraps over one shoulder. Even Theravadan monks, who supposedly all wore the same orange robes, varied. The Sri Lankan monks wore their robes, which were nearly yellow, with a casual over-the-shoulder style that fitted their tropical origin. The Burmese monks robes were a dark reddish-brown, and the Thai monks had a variety of colours: city monks wore shiny polyester saffron-coloured robes, but the forest monks had cotton ones the dull ochre of the traditional jackfruit dye. Finally, to finish off the mix, there were the various tall and pink-skinned Western monks, such as my companion, in the robes of their adopted tradition.

And then of course there were the eyebrows. As I spoke to Rev. Cuthbert, I kept noticing his eyebrows. The Thai monks shave them, so I am always surprised when I see eyebrows on monks from elsewhere—with a newly shaven head they can look like small furry creatures. But it is the Thais who are the exception in this, and it only dates from the eighteenth century. The king of Thailand, at war with Burma, ordered them to shave their eyebrows as a way of spotting Burmese soldiers disguising themselves as monks. I also suspect that it suits the Thai style, in which a clinical neatness of form matters so much.

The other Westerner we met in Sarnath was Helle Chalcroft, a Danish supporter of the Forest Sangha. She turned up late one morning at Wat Thai, very inspired at having stumbled upon Ajahn Sucitto. She had escaped from an organised Indian tour to flee for the day from Varanasi, which she disliked as much as we had. After the meal, we visited the museum and the Tibetan temple with her and went for a walk together down a side road to the local village. We had been told there was to be a Shiva festival there, and on the way we passed groups of locals dressed in their best clothes, mostly women in brightly coloured saris with red spots of pigment on their foreheads. They were both coming and going from the village up ahead, and the nearer we got the more crowded it

became. At the village the people were condensed to a solid mass around the temple, which was perched atop a raised platform some dozen steps high and sheltered by an enormous bodhi tree. The steps were filled with people trying to make their way up or down. Ajahn Sucitto and Helle stopped before the crowd got too dense, but I went on to peer between the stone pillars of the balustrade at the locals making their offerings. The priest officiating was a man, but all those taking a turn to squeeze in front of the shrine were women.

On the way back I pondered on whether the festival was actually for women—perhaps something to do with fertility, or if it was just that there usually are a lot more women at religious events. One Western sociologist I read put that down to Asian women having few other opportunities to get out of the house and have a good chat. But it seemed to me that women's attraction to religious devotion is about more than socialising, or even duty. We see the same phenomenon in the West with the "new" Eastern religions. Women seem to have more affinity for devotion than men, and perhaps there is also something about the relationship to authority. Like Helle, who seemed pretty grounded but was more inspired and reverential with monks than Steve, an American who was staying at the Wat with a Thai tour party. Despite being very interested in the teaching, he was matter-of-fact in the way he related to the monks. But Helle wanted to take the precepts and refuges from Ajahn Sucitto. He did it in the Deer Park, which made a delightful scene, the two of them sitting facing one another on the lawn, each with their hands held in *anjali*, as he chanted the formulae and she repeated it after him, while I took photographs with her camera.

And lastly there was the abbot, Venerable Sasanarasmi. I spent several hours in his room while at Sarnath as he told me stories of his time in Sri Lanka and Thailand and the early days of setting up his monastery, all while filling the room with cigarette smoke. He liked to make out that he wasn't up to much anymore, but that wasn't the case. His room was strategically placed near the entrance so that everyone coming or going



Giving the Buddhist precepts and refuges to Helle in the Deer Park, Sarnath.

had to pass it. The door was always open, and he would call you in as you went by. During one visit he told me that the new Buddhist monasteries in England were a very good thing—he had noted the standard of the Western monks he had met—and that I should do all I could to support them. He compared what was happening there with the standard of most of the monks in India. He suggested to Ajahn Sucitto that they should send some bhikkhus from England to train the India *sangha* in meditation, and that they would be welcome to use his monastery.

I even got called into his room during our full-moon vigil, on our last night, when I went to get some tea at midnight. He was not long back from Kushinagar, where he had been taking photographs of the Indian monks begging for money around the *stupa*. He was going to use the photos to get the monks disrobed.

AJAHN SUCITTO

The courtyard, where I sat sewing with a borrowed pedal-driven machine, was a good place to observe the monastery's activities. We were not the only visitors to the wat. The Thai bhikkhus I had met at Nalanda were stopping over for a few days after a round-India sight-seeing tour. Their friendliness and respect for me as a senior bhikkhu was immediate. They came round to my room with bottles of medicines, bundles of robes, and woollen hats. I accepted a couple of robes from them that were slightly larger and tougher than the skimpy "city-monk" robes I had been using since Nalanda.

One evening a Thai tour group arrived. It was cheering to hear Thai voices again, chirruping away in good humour as they settled in and, an hour or so later, lilting through the traditional devotions to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The newcomers were from Los Angeles, with Thai bhikkhus on board, and one American layman, Steve, awkward and outsized amongst the petite and graceful Thais. I got round to talking to him to try to give him some familiar company and put Thai religious mannerisms into a perspective that he could relate to. Helping him helped us. By the next day, he had arranged for Nick and myself to get a ride on their bus as far north as the outskirts of Gorakhpur. This would give us a big boost in our aim of reaching Savatthi early, and also line us up to visit Lucknow, where Poonja-ji was. We might also visit Ayodhya, the centre of the troubles that we had been hearing about over the past four months. Somehow it seemed right to go into it and get a close up of what the holy birthplace of Lord Ram was about.

In my inspired state, I persuaded a few of us diverse pilgrims to come to the Deer Park for an all-night meditation vigil by the Dhammekh *stupa*. Five of us sat there in the moonlight: the Thai monk, Brother Cuthbert, Nick, Steve, and myself. The resident bhikkhus felt they should stay and guard the wat while the abbot was away. We did some chanting—I think I tried to lead them through the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*—but no matter, our gallant performance didn't last long. A couple of armed watchmen wary of looting came round. It was after eight o'clock. We had to leave the park. Endgame.

Nick, Steve, and I repaired to the roof of the *vihara* to continue the vigil. At midnight, Steve retired for the evening—the tour bus would be leaving at dawn. Nick went downstairs to get some tea, and I was left with the stars; we had a nice easy ride out in a few hours' time, and my energy was low but steady. I wasn't going to waste one of the few opportunities India had offered to feel at home in meditation. The integrity of this place where the "Kingdom of Truth" had been set up, and the range of nationalities who had gathered here in just these few days to pay homage to that truth, had given me a burst of strength.

> *Have I not already told you that there is separation, and parting, and division from all that is dear and beloved?…each of you should make the Dhamma your island and have no other refuge.*

That had emphatically been the Buddha's way. He gave the "group of five" teachings throughout that rains, releasing their minds from holding on, the underlying cause of all *dukkha*. At the end of the rains, he made his way back to Rajagaha, telling the others to split up and "wander for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world…. Teach the Law that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end." They rarely, if ever, saw him again; but by then they didn't need him to hold on to.

NICK

So we did not walk from Sarnath to Savatthi. Instead we got up and packed after only one and a half hours' sleep to have breakfast with the affluent tour party, and then, muddled and dozy, we rode in two luxury coaches with India rushing by outside. The bhikkhus sat in the front seats, and behind them were the Thai lay people, mostly middle-aged ladies wearing colourful Thai sarongs with short tops and white wraps worn as a sash over their shoulder to designate them as pilgrims. Inspired by our walking pilgrimage, they collected donations to help us on our way: one hundred dollars, two *yahms* (the saffron shoulder bags that every bhikkhu carries), and a full set of robes for Ajahn Sucitto.

They finally dropped us in the early afternoon five kilometres before Gorakhpur, where the road north met the main east-west trunk road. We were going west. They were going on to Kushinagar, to the east, and then Lumbini, stopping one night at each, part of a fourteen-day tour of the holy places with New Delhi and the Taj Mahal thrown in. It all seemed so hurried and out of sync. They had brought us two hundred kilometres, the equivalent of a week's walking, and left us dazed, standing by the road, with me clutching a wad of Indian bank notes, watching their coach disappear.

Of course, I had left something behind. This time it was the new robes Ajahn Sucitto had just been given. Ajahn Sucitto realised straight away and was visibly upset. I apologised but could not feel too bad; he had robes already, and the new set were Thai city ones that were very unlikely to fit him. For Ajahn Sucitto, though, it was the receiving of them that was important; I could have left them anywhere else, but to have left them on the coach was a rejection of their gift.

Luckily, we weren't standing there long. Minutes later we had hitched a ride and were bouncing along at a more sedate forty kilometres an hour in a Tata long-distance lorry, befriended by driver and owner who plied us with tea at each stop, and who eventually dropped us at Ayodhya in the gathering dusk.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Ayodhya received us gently. This was Rama's city, where according to the *Ramayana*, he had reigned as *dharma* king: a blessing to his people, creating peace, harmony, and fertility on the earth. And this at the end of a long and arduous path sustained by righteousness. The story goes that he was a prince sent into exile due to his stepmother's jealousy, spending fourteen years in the forest accompanied by his utterly loyal brother Lakshmana and his totally devoted wife Sita. She gets abducted by the demon king of Sri Lanka, Ravana, who is defying the gods; but eventually Rama tracks her down and with the aid of an army of animals, including the heroic monkey, Hanuman, kills Ravana, regains his wife, and returns to Ayodhya, where another loyal brother who has been ruling in his stead willingly hands over the throne. So it is: gods, demons, and kings defer to the power of *dharma*.

Well, as we descended dazed from our epic truck ride, Ayodhya itself was remarkably peaceful. It was an Indian town you could actually call quaint. It had no other business than the celebration of Rama, and at this time of year, was less frequented by bathers in the river Sarayu (as it is in the sacred literature) or Ghaghara (according to the map). *Jai Ram*! was on everybody's lips, but as a greeting and a blessing, rather than as a war cry. The faintly illuminated winding streets were uncongested; the crumbling old houses were intermingled with temples and lodgings; and the wodge of *chai* shops and stalls selling religious posters and strings of *mala* beads was occasionally interleaved by stores selling copies of some of the many versions and editions of the *Ramayana*. It was too late to do a lot of searching for lodgings, so we put up in a small guesthouse near the waterfront.

The diary entry for the next day, February 15th, has just a few lines about feeling cold in the wind from the *ghats,* violent bouts of sickness and wandering around winding alleys. I remember the town as having a slow organic vitality. The back streets were like the connecting tissue

of some gigantic sacred plant. Temples blossomed everywhere, some still crisply formed and coloured, some more like fungal growths on top of the brick stumps of other temples, some overblown and gradually disintegrating, with saplings growing out of the brickwork. And then there was a *sadhus'* resthouse somewhere we had unsuccessfully attempted to lodge in.

By the evening, I had brightened up enough to engage one of the priests, in a temple beside the river, in religious dialogue. I tried to get him to explain the *meaning* of the variety of little statues on the altar: images of Rama, of Hanuman, of Krishna, of Durga, of Lakshmi. In India, the gods seemed to represent *why*, and *how*, things manifest…or were they considered 'real.' Maybe the priest could explain? He gazed at us benignly through his spectacles and brought out two items that looked like tufty pipe cleaners. He bestowed them on us with a smile: *"Jai Ram.* Holy…for cleaning nostril."

Purity means everything in India. At times, it was more like purgation. As with the Ayodhya crisis: it was hardly about the legendary god-king at all. It was about Indian politics. In 1984, a fundamentalist Hindu organisation, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, launched a campaign here to regain a site occupied by a mosque that they claimed to be the site of Rama's birth. (The Buddhists were keeping quiet about their ancient stupa on the site.) This resulted in predictable conflict: 2,500 people died in one riot in Bhagalpur in Bihar alone.

Meanwhile, a minority political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), sided with the fundamentalists and through that gained enough seats in the general elections to be a key player in the ruling coalition that was nominally led by the Janata Dal Party. The coalition began to fracture when the prime minister, V. P. Singh, forbade the demolition of the mosque even as the leader of BJP led a religious pilgrimage throughout India to mobilise Hindu support. The pilgrimage itself left such a wake of communal violence that the Janata Dal governor of Uttar Pradesh closed the border with Bihar to prevent it from reaching Ayodhya, and

V.P. Singh had Advani, leader of BJP, arrested. This resulted in BJP withdrawing support from the government and calling a national strike. Riots ensued and the government collapsed. A new coalition took over, backed by the Congress Party, but meanwhile, a couple of days before Nick and I landed in Delhi, thousands of *kar sevaks* ("holy workers") gathered in Ayodhya, broke through the security lines, and attacked the mosque—which resulted in riots, unrest, and curfews throughout India. Things were still simmering: a "peaceful protest" in December had resulted in more violence, and the issue was obviously still both completely unresolved and a powerful vehicle for political gain. Through it BJP's representation in India's parliament had grown from 2 to 119 seats in two years.

India certainly needed a *dharma* king now. But the irony was that the Indian monarchs who best complied with the Vedic standards of such a king were Ashoka the Buddhist and Akbar the Mughal—who started his reign as a Muslim but steadily moved towards a more universalist position. Since then, Gandhi had tried, but he had been assassinated—by a Hindu fundamentalist. *Ram* was the word on his dying breath, but Rama had long since left India to another monarch, a queen who was establishing her *dharma* everywhere. *Jai Ram*! people kept saying, but *Jai Kali*! was closer to the truth.

Those nose cleaners were the end of Ayodhya for me. I was just about cleaned out, and not just physically. Though I felt weak and sick, it was time to move on. I remember another long bridge and a shining river, and after that standing around at some road junction trying to figure out whether to hitch-hike, walk, or catch a bus. If only I could think straight. I just knew that we had to get to Savatthi, the favourite resort of the Blessed One. Things would be better there.

> *And what is the middle way…? It is the noble eightfold path—that is to say: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.*

NICK

Ayodhya was all the things that Varanasi had not been. Where Varanasi had promised so much, only to disappoint, we had expected the worst of Ayodhya and found it magical. There was no sign of the troubles we'd heard so much about. We had a chat with an army lieutenant we met as we walked about the town who assured us there was no problem. "It is these *kar sevak* fellows, and they have gone now." Somehow the place had managed to remain still despite the storm that had raged round it. And just to emphasise how much the whole thing had been an excuse for politicians to whip up support, there was the conversation we had with a Hindu priest in the largest temple we visited. He dismissed the whole controversy. The temple we were now in was the true site of the birth of Rama, not the site of the mosque. We later found out that there was yet another large temple on the other side of Ayodhya that also claimed to be the site of Rama's birth.

My only regret was that we never got to stay in the *sadhus' dharmashala*. The place was an Indian version of a Dickensian doss house, full of amazing characters with long matted hair, their tridents resting against the walls. Some were in orange robes, while others were nearly naked and covered in white dust, but all had their foreheads smeared with the three wide vertical lines of paste—two outer ones of white, the inner, red—that designated them as followers of Ram. Unfortunately we only got to stay one night in the town.

The next day we were back on the road, riding in a local lorry a few miles along the trunk road to a turning for the road north to Gonda. Where we were actually going, though, was uncertain. The plan originally had been to go to Savatthi via Lucknow. Ajahn Sucitto wanted to call in on Shri Poonja-ji, teacher of many Westerners in India who had flocked to his very ordinary house in the suburbs. But on leaving Ayodhya, Ajahn Sucitto could not find the piece of paper with the address given by Thomas and decided that the visit was not meant to be.

If we were not bound for Lucknow, then I wanted to return to walking. Rushing across the plains in lorries and coaches felt wrong to me. From here north it was less populated and would make fine walking country. There was even a large wetland nature reserve between us and Savatthi.

We stood waiting for a lift undecided. How far should we take it and how far to walk? I suspected that Ajahn Sucitto just wanted to get on to Savatthi. He appeared to be in a sullen mood; when not animated his face can look harsh. As we stood there in silence waiting—there was hardly any traffic—it dawned on me that the reason he was so listless and disinterested, the reason for things like losing the address, was that he was ill. I asked him and he nodded, yes, he had dysentery again and yes, it was bad this time and he felt very weak, and, with a slight shake of the head, no, he was probably not up to walking. It could be hard to spot my companion's difficulties. He made so little of them. Part of his character expected life to be difficult, even welcomed it. So I opened up to this other person and his needs, and we took a local bus to the next town and from there hitched a ride to Gonda to get him some medicine. The helpful man in the pharmacy there sold us flea-seed husk for Ajahn Sucitto's diarrhoea and gave us the time of the next train to Balrampur, the railway station nearest to Savatthi.

The branch line from Gonda to Balrampur swings up to Nepal and over in a sweeping curve of narrow-gauge track that comes down again to Gorakhpur. It was just like the one we had walked beside when we first came south from Nepal, and like that one, steam engines still pulled the trains. It was on a branch line like this that I first got to ride on the running plate of a steam locomotive. I was twenty then and could still remember the thrill and the sight of the driver stopping in the middle of nowhere for an old lady with an earthen-ware pot. The stoker shovelled some coal out, she handed up the pot in exchange, and we spent the rest of the ride drinking the contents: some pretty good rice wine.

This time we were riding on the 46 UP, which left at 11.20 A.M. Of course

I had to ride on the locomotive. I tried to get Ajahn Sucitto, who seemed to have perked up a bit, to join me, but he wasn't having it. He said he couldn't see why. So I went up alone at one of the stops and was invited aboard.

The locomotive started slowly, the pistons turning the drive wheels over with a distinct clunk. Then the rhythm gradually built until eventually we were rushing along, the fiery steel monster shuddering and pounding. The driver stood on one side leaning out to see the line ahead, the scenery rushing by him. His khaki uniform and the white hanky tied on his head were streaked with black, his face was pockmarked from the burns of years of flying cinders, and there were hard calluses on his hands from handling hot iron without gloves. He had just four controls: a bar that engaged the drive rods, another that put the engine into reverse, a brass brake lever, and a wire that he pulled to let steam into the whistle.

Shouting above the racket he told me that the engine had been built in Canada over forty years ago. Like so much in India it had been patched and kept going ever since. A couple of old bicycle chains held the main control bar in place, and there were rusted holes in the metal plate of the cab so that I could see down to the rails rushing by underneath. There were various battered valves and levers controlling the water pressure that the stoker adjusted by hitting them with a hammer.

I stood on the opposite side from the driver, leaning out to watch the snorting beast eating up the line ahead. I loved it. We thundered through the countryside, peasants in the fields turning to stare blankly as we passed, and the odd cow lumbering off the line ahead in response to a blast from the whistle. Then we slowed as we came to the next small town, passing people squatting by the line at their morning ablutions then the waiting passengers on the platform, and stopped, the carriages shuddering to a halt behind us. There was a lot of commotion back there—passengers getting on and off, vendors calling their wares—while we were alone beside the water tower with its hanging hose. After a brief wait and the wave of a green flag,we started again, initially the wheels turning so slowly, then we were pounding along again.

Even trains are included in the Indian sense of caste and duty. In England, when they still used steam, a man started his career as a boy helping in the engine shed and then, as he passed tests, he became first a fireman and then a driver. In India what you do on the railways depends on your caste. There is even a unique caste: the Anglo-Indians who drive the main-line expresses. Of course it is only the lower castes doing the menial work. Standing where I was, I was out of the way of the stoker flinging coal into the furnace. He would open it every few minutes, a blast of red heat would hit us as he threw a half a dozen shovel loads in, then he would slam it shut. There was also a little assistant stoker, probably of an even lower caste, who spent most of his time back in the tender preparing the coal—breaking it up and throwing it to the front for the stoker to fling into the firebox. Both of them were stripped down, dusted with coal, and gleaming with sweat.

I once rode on the footplate of the Bombay Mail on the main line from New Delhi. That took so much coal that the firebox was constantly open, and two stokers took turns throwing the coal in. We rode through the night, the train belching red ashes out into the blackness and me sharing the red glow of a *chillum* with the stokers. These days all the main lines have diesels instead, and although there are still steam trains on the branch lines, even their days are numbered—Indian Railways has finally given in.

A steam train takes so much more work than a diesel. It takes four hours from lighting a pile of sticks in the firebox to bringing it up to steam. It has to be tended by a gang of men who grease and oil, bang and curse, until it is ready to leave. Then in harness it takes two minutes to reach forty miles an hour, the fastest they can go, while a diesel can do that in half a minute. That difference means a lot on a branch line where they stop every ten minutes. And of course, diesels are much less work to drive; there is no coal to shovel and no cinders or hot metal to be burnt by. A year after we got back from India, Indian Railways started to replace its remaining steam trains. By 1995, they were scrapping one

hundred a week. Even with the thousands that there once were, soon there would be none left. The vast monolith of Indian Railways, the largest employer in the world with 60,000 kilometres of track carrying 18 million people a day, has finally joined the rest of the railway world in saying good-bye to steam.

So I'm very glad I took that opportunity to ride one last time on an Indian steam engine. I did have another go at getting Ajahn Sucitto to try, after I returned to our carriage. I nearly managed at one stop when the train was held up for ten minutes, but when he had finally got out to take a walk to look at the engine, just to please me, the whistle went and he had to return.

At Balrampur we descended and left the monster to chug away up the line. Outside the station I returned to the pilgrimage. There was a big gold-painted Buddha, a two-kilometre walk to the town, and as we walked along my mind started to fill up again with petty thoughts. I even started, irrationally, to resent missing the wetland nature reserve, despite enjoying the train ride so much. Ajahn Sucitto, I suspect, was fed up just because he was so run down from dysentery. And of course maybe that's why he was so disinterested in the steam engine. He would not tell me that, though; he would just go hard-faced and silent, and I would take it as disdain. It was so easy to retreat back into our personal worlds when things got difficult.

From the town we hitched a ride to Savatthi on a local lorry with blasting music and two steel bull's horns on its prow. On our descent we met the Thai tour party just returning to their coach. They had done Kushinagar, Lumbini, and now Savatthi since we parted and were staying in the Thai wat that night. Steve suggested we come by to see them that evening.

When we did we found another Wat Thai, seemingly much like the one we had left in Sarnath. Steve wasn't around, though, so we sat there with Ajahn Sucitto talking to a few of the Thai ladies. We drank tea and soft drinks again, and I received the results of another collection—this

time a cheque for one hundred U.S. dollars, which regretfully I could not cash in India. Sitting there, I could see how it must feel on one of these organised pilgrimages. Now back in the familiarity of the wat, it was as if we had been nowhere. The strange rushing journey through India, the weird *sadhus* at Ayodhya, and the fire-belching monster of a steam engine seemed just an aberration from reality.

The wat had the usual large white concrete accommodation blocks, and there were Thai *nagas* guarding the gateway, but even on that short visit and feeling groggy from the journey, we sensed something was wrong. The gates had been locked, and it had taken some doing to get the Indian *chaukidar* to let us in—the Thai ladies had to remonstrate with him. The resident *sangha* ignored us—the abbot continued to talk to some of the Thai ladies and then retired—and we got the distinct impression we were not wanted. Fortunately we had arranged by then, on Sister Thanissara's advice, to stay elsewhere. Venerable Sasanarasmi had also warned us: he told us that the resident monk, a Cambodian trained in Thailand, was interested only in money. While he was all over Thai tour parties who made generous donations, he would be uninterested in the likes of us. Sure enough, when we called by to pay our respects two days later, a duty that Ajahn Sucitto saw as important whatever might be said of the abbot, the abbot did not know his duty, and we weren't even allowed in.



22

Action and Stillness

AJAHN SUCITTO

It was time for a rest—from doing, and from ceaseless waves of contact. Time for a rest even from being anything. Ah Savatthi, and the Jetavana!

Jetavana, or more fully "Jeta Grove, Anathapindika's Park," was the first and the greatest Buddhist monastery. When the Buddha returned to Rajagaha from Sarnath, King Bimbisara had welcomed him back and offered him the Bamboo Grove to live in, but it had no buildings in it to offer the benefits of seclusion, away from "heat, cold, burning, and creeping things" as our daily recollection on the use of lodgings has it. Even a Buddha could make good use of a door. But it took somebody to spring into action to make that happen. And that was Anathapindika, "feeder of the poor," the rich merchant of Savatthi who subsequently became the most renowned of the Buddha's male lay supporters.

Anatthapindika had met the Buddha in Rajagaha when visiting his brother-in-law; had been so excited by the thought that an awakened one was residing in the nearby park that after a sleepless night, he'd made his way to see the Master in the Bamboo Grove. Just before dawn was the encounter: the Buddha welcomed the stranger out of the darkness and gave him teachings. Thrilled and in awe, Anathapindika had invited the Buddha and the Sangha to come to Savatthi for the next rains.

"Tathagatas delight in empty dwelling places," replied the Buddha, consenting with a suggestion of what kind of set-up he favoured.

When Anathapindika got back to Savatthi, he looked for a suitable place: the best site was a park just outside the city, owned by a Prince Jeta. The prince, however, was not interested in selling it. He dismissively replied that the park was not available unless its soil were covered with 100,000 pieces of gold. "It's a deal," said the merchant, and to everybody's amazement had cartfuls of gold brought in. Even 100,000 pieces didn't quite cover the land, but Prince Jeta was so impressed by Anathapindika's eagerness that he decided to give the remaining piece of land. Anathapindika then set to, having gates, halls, dwellings, storehouses, bath-rooms, and more built in the park. And so the ideal monastery, the "Jetavana," was set up and given to the Sangha, and the Buddha spent the next rains, his fifth, there. In fact he spent nineteen rains retreats there altogether, and six in another monastery, the Pubbarama, subsequently built nearby.

Savatthi (Sanskrit: Shravasti), as the capital of the Kosala kingdom, must have been a busy city in the Buddha's day; and although he certainly enjoyed solitude, the Buddha must also have appreciated a situation where he could easily receive visitors interested in Dhamma. Here also he could give regular instructions to the monks and nuns who would gather eagerly to take up the three-months' rains residence in his presence. However the place was far from busy now. Saheth Maheth as it was now called, was nothing much—it consisted of some modern Buddhist temples (and one Jain) and a bazaar that had gathered along the adjacent modern road since the ancient site was discovered (by Cunningham again) in 1863. "Nothing much" was just fine with me. I could feel myself brightening up as we entered Jeta Grove and walked through its graciously laid out gardens to the Mahabodhi Temple.

This was the temple we were planning to stay at for our retreat. It looked like it would suit our purposes as well as Sister Thanissara had suggested. A lonely kind of a place, it was one of the oldest of the recent

monasteries to have been established and looked as if it had been abandoned, or barely used, for many years. We first detected it by its pagoda poking up through the trees; it must have had some Chinese origins. However it was currently owned by the Maha Bodhi Society and in the custodianship of Venerable Somaratana, an elderly Sri Lankan bhikkhu.

Venerable Somaratana greeted us slightly nervously, with a faint smile and a patchy command of English. Having found the letter that I had sent explaining that we were interested in spending time in meditation, and having connected us to Sister Thanissara and "the other bhikkhus" (whom I imagined must have been those that Sister Rocana accompanied five years previously), he relaxed a little. It wasn't that we were not welcome; what became clear was that he had been worrying as to whether the place was good enough for us and whether he could provide the kind of food that he imagined Westerners needed.

Then Nick had a great idea. He decided to use the money that the Thai tour party had given for our welfare to sponsor food for us and Bhante and his couple of fellow *samanas* for the duration of our visit. Not only that, he covered the cost of hiring a cook (as is often the case in monasteries that have no lay support, the monks cooked for themselves), all of which would leave enough also to make a sizeable donation to the monastery. So, although Bhante was still a little doubtful about what we would *like*…*that* was settled.

The accommodation was a large rudimentary room on the first floor of the two-storey building. The room had been divided into three by thin partitions and connected to an ante-room that opened onto a veranda. From there, one could view the acre of land that made up the monastic premises. Over to the east was the seven-storey pagoda with a shrine hall in front and a smaller building behind. There were a few small brick dwellings, presumably where the other monastics lived. Separate from these and to the west, in the direction of the Jetavana, was another building, a simple single-storey hall of more recent construction. This was a meditation hall, sponsored by disciples of Venerable Benne Seija, a Jap-

anese master I had never heard of. It was a cool, secluded shrine where we could spend time in silent undisturbed meditation. And beyond that to the west, was the Jetavana wall, which had graciously collapsed in several places to allow us access any time of day or night to the Buddha's own monastery. You don't get much better than that.

The Jetavana was quite magical, not just that late afternoon, but every day. What is visible now are mostly remnants of buildings from the Gupta period, but there were also bricks from the Kushan period at the beginning of the Christian era. And the foundations of some of the sites are reputedly Ashokan. But it was much more than a piece of Buddhist history. It wasn't that big, and it wasn't that quiet—there were often a few pilgrims making their way around, and regular battles between the monkeys and the dogs; but it had a certain presence. I visited it at dawn when the colours of the day were just forming; and again during the bright morning and the warm, peopled, afternoons; and again with candles and incense when twilight drew back the veil of time. The weather was easy—sunny and warm most days, cool at night, and with occasional rain—and the earth was blossoming. But, no, it was more than that. Not just for the gardens with birds warbling from every tree; not just for the ruined temples, monasteries and *stupas*; but because if ever a place could be peaceful (which in India seems unlikely), the Jetavana was it—despite it all. It reminded me that he, the Buddha, was at peace in the midst of things. That meant a lot to me.

A cold wind was blowing from the Himalayas on the morning of the 17th, our first morning. A thick rice porridge, mixed with coconut milk and ginger, had been prepared for us. The wind also blew in Venerable Nimalo, the German bhikkhu we had heard of at Sarnath. I greeted him with the same faint smile Bhante had worn. What would he want? Counsel? Companionship? I wasn't up to providing much of either. But no. He was sitting politely waiting for us when we returned from our morning amble around the Jetavana and asked if he might be allowed to pay his respects. He was on an indefinite *tudong* in India. We invited

him to have the meal with us. He ate from his bowl in silence and afterwards offered to wash my bowl for me. I took my outer robe off and put it into a bucket to soak. When I came back an hour later it was washed and hanging out to dry. He had been trained in Ajahn Chah's monasteries, where serving senior bhikkhus is the norm. And so, that was that… and he moved into the third cubicle in our room. It was a pity about the loose floorboards, but what's a little creaking among friends…?

Apart from an elderly Indian bhikkhu (who had been ordained only recently) and the two *samaneras* (who we rarely saw), the monastery was also sheltering Stefano, an Italian man, and Helene, a young Spanish woman pregnant with Stefano's child. They had an easy warmth. And they were on retreat too, doing some kind of Tibetan tantra practice that seemed to involve her cooking food a lot of the time and Stefano ringing bells now and then and rattling a little hand drum. He asked, was this a problem for us? But it shouldn't be…after all a *puja* from time to time was part of the practice.

So on the fourth day, Nick and I began the retreat, which would be for two weeks, beginning with a week of meditation together for most of the day and ending with more solitary practice between the morning and evening *puja*s. A structured day generally gives strength to a continual and unwavering focus on a theme such as "mindfulness of breathing" *(anapanasati)*. At least it should. But my body was not happy with what my mind had been putting it through; so it was not prepared to come up with the energy. Meanwhile my mind had run low on inspirational fuel. So when the thought arose that I'd better get down to sitting upright with unflagging attention on the sensations arising with the process of breathing—for twelve hours a day—the reply came back: No way! Not weeks of struggling to make this beaten old nag of a mind jump through the hoops of *anapanasati*! As the mood rushed up and subsided, I saw the Buddha's hand lifted in the protection *mudra*. Something said: "Don't do that. No more campaigns. Take it a moment at a time, and don't create suffering." That seemed good enough to be getting on with.

NICK

Anticipating a retreat one always thinks of peace and that sense of the wholeness of everything that can arise, but the initial reality is often totally different. Meditation can bring one up against one's worst aspects. It would not work otherwise. For me it is the Manipulator, that aspect which seeks to control situations and get them to turn out the way I want. These days I can sit in meditation without wanting to rush out to stop every single bit of noise, but on retreats I still invariably spend the first few days getting upset with something: either the chap I'm sitting next to who thinks *anapanasati* is helped by doing full-body heavy breathing; the door that creaks every time someone even looks at it; or the way the teacher insists on taking what seems like most of a meditation session giving instructions that have to ramble over contemplations on our place in the cosmos, various aspects of mind, and what he had for breakfast in order to introduce a simple meditation technique everyone already knows. After a few days I settle down, the *angst* goes, and I accept that however it is, is the way things are. That's when the peace and oneness comes along.

I should have known that after more than three months of contending with India, and having arrived at Savatthi annoyed that we had not walked through the wetlands, I would reap the obvious results. The retreat was more like one of the first meditation courses I did, when I could not settle and anything would get me upset. I could not sleep in the room I shared with Ajahn Sucitto and Venerable Nimalo; I'd lie there listening to the sounds of them settling and be brought sharply out of my enveloping drowsiness by the slightest thing. I was disturbed when doing sitting meditation in the Japanese meditation hall if Ajahn Sucitto decided to do walking meditation; his steps, as he gently walked up and down, creating the slightest "pat pat" on the concrete floor. Then of course there was India: the locals who would come to stare at me sitting in meditation in Jeta Grove; the pilgrimage tour parties who came round

guided by a babble from a megaphone in Japanese, Thai, or Sinhalese; the children who threw stones at the monkeys. And then there were the weddings. As we were now into the middle of the wedding season, there was one at least every other night in the surrounding villages.

On the third night we sat in darkness until midnight at the Gandhakuti or "fragrant cell," a small ruined shrine on the site of the Buddha's *kuti,* or hut. With a single flickering candle alight it would have been exquisitely beautiful—had we not also been assaulted by Indian pop songs blaring from a nearby village. They went on after we retired, so that the move I had made out on to the veranda to sleep alone did not work and I had an even more disturbed night. The noise was still going on the next morning, only stopping in the afternoon to start up again in the evening from a different village, just to the west instead of the north and, if anything, even nearer. So even after a few days I was far from the detached and concentrated state that I was striving to be in. Of course, the striving was the problem. The final act, and my complete undoing, was the night of the storm.

It had looked like rain all day, and there had been gusts of cold wind suddenly lifting the dead leaves in the courtyard. I had been having a hard time of it, with one thing after another disturbing me. There were brainfever birds in the courtyard outside. Their call, from which they get their apt name, increases in both pitch and volume to reach a crescendo and had thoroughly managed to destroy my attention. Then when I moved into the grove to get away from them, there were children throwing stones at the monkeys again. I put up with that only for so long before I went over to stop them. They just shouted at me and ran off… only to sneak back, once I had settled again, to lob stones at *me*. Then I decided to spend that night on the veranda of the pagoda—that would be a quiet place to sit and then to sleep…or so I reckoned.

The storm started at midnight. The sky was split asunder by lightning and enormous rolls of thunder; the heavy rain came down, blown in every direction by great gusts of wind. It came pouring onto the

veranda, leaving nowhere dry for me. The pagoda, the meditation hall, and the temple were all locked by then, and I felt too sheepish to bang on the temple door and wake everyone up to get back inside. So I huddled against the wall, shifting around the pagoda each time the wind and slanting rain changed direction. By the morning I was tired, miserable, and damp. I gave up striving to achieve anything.

Instead of meditating, I spent the morning wandering around the grove enjoying the freshness after the rain. The grove really was beautiful—and peaceful; the low red ruins were set amidst a large garden of flowering trees and shrubs. I realised for the first time that the Indian spring had sneaked up on us. New leaves were opening on all the trees whilst the old ones were starting to fall, and many of the trees and shrubs were coming into flower. Butterflies were fluttering everywhere and the night's rain followed by the sun rising in a clear blue sky had set the birdlife singing like crazy.

I spent the rest of the day just sitting there taking it all in. There was only one man, a gardener cutting the grass, in the whole place. Compared with the rest of the Buddha's Middle Land we had seen, it was a true sanctuary. Maybe there were occasional pilgrim groups, but they came and went in no time, and there were no other tourists here, no Indian sightseers, and no beggars pestering me. The problem, as ever, had been in my mind.

From then on I stopped trying so hard to meditate and spent more time just sitting under trees in the grove or strolling along the walkways, slowly getting to know the rich variety of wildlife around me. I saw some fifty species of bird: from tiny purple sunbirds—the size of large insects, their wings flashing a metallic blue, purple, and black, like Amazonian butterflies—through tree pies with colourful long tails, and ponderous grey hornbills launching themselves from tree to tree, to large vultures, crested honey buzzards and storks circling in the sky above or sitting atop the highest trees. For much of the pilgrimage I had been wanting to go to special places for the birdlife. I had found much more by simply stopping and letting it all happen around me.

That day I also woke up to just how run down Ajahn Sucitto really was. He was so bad he had given up tea! The one thing he was really fond of. When I asked, he reluctantly admitted that his stomach could no longer take it, nor the *jaggery* I had got for the evenings. I suspected it was protein deficiency, caused by the intermittent dysentery he had been suffering. I spoke to Bhante about it, and he told me where in the locality I could buy *kolwah*, a product of milk. I also mentioned to Stefano and Helene that if they were ever cooking eggs it would be good if they could spare one. During the rest of our stay Ajahn Sucitto received a regular offering of eggs—boiled, fried, and once as part of a large Spanish omelette—and Bhante gave Ajahn Sucitto one of only two jars of Marmite he had brought from Sri Lanka.

Kolwah was a discovery we had made in Varanasi. The bhikkhu Vinaya mentions something derived from milk that is allowed in the afternoon. In the West the *sangha* interpret this as cheese, but in India there is no cheese. I suspected, however—India being the way it is—anything there once, even 2,500 years ago, would still be there somewhere. I asked Ajahn Sucitto about the Vinaya references and learnt that the product was made by separating out part of the milk. Then, when we were wandering through Varanasi's narrow streets, we had found one alley where everyone was working with milk. They had wide pans of rich buffalo milk simmering over coals, and they were using large flat perforated ladles to skim off the top. This was drained in cloth, and the resulting product, a lumpy pile of dirty-looking off-white solids, we were told, was called *kolwah* and was used as the basis for Indian milk sweets. Ajahn Sucitto felt that it would be allowable in the afternoon, and, yes, as sugar was allowable, even *barfi*, the milk sweets, were allowable too. Only the plain *barfi*, of course, and not the versions with pistachios, cashews, or cherries I had admired in the shops—but still for me this was some find!

Ajahn Sucitto explained that he was trying to follow the Vinaya's principles, not as a set of restrictive rules but a way of enabling the Sangha to

lead a life suitable for spiritual endeavour. The "medicines" were there to help this, and he felt *kolwah* must be at least as near to the original as cheese. There is little description of the medicines in the Vinaya, just a long list of names with the occasional reference elsewhere in another context for a few of them. Most would probably have been herbal remedies collected from the forest and are completely lost now, but he felt that the Buddha had also meant his followers to have some things to help them in the afternoon, not just as medicines but also for doing something like our pilgrimage. Coming from an ascetic like him I wasn't going to argue with that.

In the market near Savatthi I managed to buy a kilo of *kolwah*; a big cream coloured block of it with the texture of cheese cake, which they wrapped in banana leaves and placed in a plastic bag. When I got back I gave some to Ven. Nimalo, much to his surprise, assuring him that Ajahn Sucitto had pronounced it "allowable." I kept some for myself, but most of it went to Ajahn Sucitto. In Varanasi I had been disappointed that we had found *kolwah* so late in our journey; now I was just pleased that having finally realised how run-down he was, I could do this for him. It's amazing how caught up one can become in one's own world, even—or perhaps I should say, especially—when *trying* to meditate.

AJAHN SUCITTO

"I can't do this." "But this is what you're here for." *"But I can't do this."* "This is the whole point of being a monk." *"But I can't do this."* "Try harder, this is the path to awakening." *"But I can't do this."* "Try again, just focus the mind…." *"But I don't* want *to do this…."*

Meditation: the art of war. Who can ever win?

As the days on retreat rolled, sagged, surged, and faded, with them went the need to be in charge, and even the need to stop the conflict. And as all that slowly collapsed, behind it all was the refuge.

No more judgements, no activity other than to relate to experience. So

what else has this pilgrimage been about? Rather than gather or obsess with experiences, deny or fight them: to learn to respond to what's happening. But I needed to sit still to take that lesson in deeply, to collect attention and let the response happen. It was a kind of welcoming. Then the focal points selected themselves: the foot, or a toe, or even a joint of a toe, or some other sensation in the body. And when attention flashed off to a sound or a memory, I could just encourage it to stay there for a second, notice, and welcome that moment of being peaceful with an experience, and then let the attention relax back to the body.

And out of it came the turn-around, humbling and miraculous: "Walking, sitting, knowing the blessing of consciousness" says the little red diary in its entry for February 21st. Thankfully it didn't have a lot to say for the next two weeks: revelations always seem so foolish out of context.

Some days the music from the local villages sent us into the Jetavana itself to find silence in one of the more remote ruined temple buildings…and gradually the retreat opened up from the cool and fly-free Venerable Benne Seija meditation hall with its delicate Japanese incense, to the ancient monastic complex, its Kushan and Gupta brickwork soaked in devotion and attended by small groups of pilgrims. There was action and impingement there too: troupes of monkeys pranced in the trees dodging the missiles hurled at them by a worker from the fields to the east of the grove. The monkeys would make their way over there to raid his crops, and the farm worker would spend most of the afternoon driving them back west across the grove, hurling lumps of Gupta (or Kushan) brick at the trees to do so. On the ground, a couple of farm dogs jumped up and down in a frustrated frenzy, emitting the high-pitched yelp that dogs seem to reserve for monkeys. In response, simian teeth were bared and monkey obscenities hurled back from the quaking trees.

No, it was not a retreat that came to tranquillity; it was more like massaging things with Buddha balm. Massage it all: the "thwacks" of brick

against tree, the yelps, the muzak, the flies buzzing up my nose and in my ears, the cool quiet meditation hall which let my mind wander, the dreariness, the soft mystic dawns, the rattling of Stefano's drum, the times of clarity, and the sudden ripping rain-storms. So much stuff. But I could learn not to ask for nothing. Then the projections, the expectations, and the prejudices stopped, and it became possible to respond to the inner world with compassion—and thereby arrive at a stillness that was yet responsive.

As the retreat settled into lucidity, I would allow times in the day for that responsiveness to roam freely. I wrote to Amaravati asking that some of the money that we had sent through the uncashable cheque could be used to send my mother some flowers on her birthday. I wrote to one of the young novices who had left the monastery in disillusionment and decided to make him a *mala* from the beads that Sister Thanissara had given me. Then there was a prisoner who I knew would be delighted to receive a letter from India. Sharing blessings came to be a very workable practice. We even used it as a theme for the commemoration of Magha Puja on the site of the Buddha's own *kuti* on the full moon of February. And that site offered Venerable Nimalo and myself a chance to talk about bhikkhu life. It was good to have someone who could act as a reference; seeing the whole pilgrimage as an event in the context of a lifetime of training opened the focus and brought attention back to a more spacious mode. Mind states were no great problem; it's just a matter of seeing them through. After a rough start, by midnight, the body even kicked in with some energy. Dhamma -practice could bring such blessings!

NICK

As the mind becomes still, the beauty in everything becomes more manifest: the patterns made by the sunlight falling through the leaves in the Jeta Grove as I did walking meditation; a dark red dragonfly sunning

itself beside where I was sitting. Stillness also gives nature confidence; eventually I got to see everything in the grove, even the small birds that hide inside the bushes and make the sweetest of calls.

It was at Savatthi that I finally saw a green barbet, the bird we had mistaken for a water pump. I could hear their calls, but even standing under the tree I could never see the bird. Then finally one day I spotted one, tucked into the armpit of a big branch, it's back exactly the dull green of the foliage, and it's head and front coloured a grey brown to match the bark. I suppose it has to be so well disguised if it's going to spend all day making a racket like that.

I also came to really appreciate the elegantly planted gardens. The grove was laid out with tree-lined walks, flowering shrubs set around each important set of archaeological remains, and a wide grove of large trees around the perimeter. Part of this outer grove had been disrupted in recent years by further archaeological digging undertaken by the Japanese. This now looked instead like an old bomb site, a gap with only foundations left in it. There had been some recent tree planting around this, in an attempt to include these new sites, but it had been done with little sympathy and served only to highlight how good the original was.

Once the agitation had settled, I also became aware of the ground of my mind, where more subterranean beings can lurk. The drives and impulses we were born with and the deep conditioning caused by things that really hurt, a long time ago. I have found that I get to see it all if I wait…and watch. Everything will come swimming out of the murk if I am patient. When you have experienced that, you don't really believe in something "unconscious" anymore.

The practice of mediation brings light to the mind. It makes it a more pleasant place to be, and the things swimming around are easier to see. On this retreat they were all from the last year, before I left England. The selfish acts done while caught up in the recent success of my work; the people I'd hurt and in particular the unresolved state I'd left my love life

in. I had been sending that back to the depths every time it surfaced for the whole pilgrimage.

It all stemmed from the success. Through my warden job I had worked with the coal industry to create a mature wetland nature reserve in a year on the site of a gas works for a national exhibition. I had received many prizes, no end of praise, and lots of media attention But the distracted state I was in had made me both needy and heedless. After years of a steady relationship with a woman who lived at a distance, I had also become involved with someone locally. It had started so casually, with both of us deliberately not looking at, or referring to, the consequences. But as they do, the relationship had grown, and to be loved by someone with her passion, who will do anything for you, was very attractive. She wanted me to surrender to that, and for us to walk the spiritual path together, but somehow, I could never quite believe it. Instead I neither committed myself nor ended the relationship: sometimes I was drawing away, sometimes giving in, and I was only making it worse for us all. My old partner had wanted nothing to do with me when she found out, telling me to sort myself out, then let her know—either way. Now from the perspective of the Jeta Grove, the spaciousness of that response felt so right. In the world passion may be prized, but it is dispassion that is one of the qualities of enlightenment.

I resolved that at the end of the retreat I would write the letter that I'd been unable to write for so long. While I was at it I'd also write and apologise to my assistant on the nature reserves who had been given such a hard time by my confused state over that previous year. Perhaps he felt no resentment, but an apology would do no harm, and it would help assuage that other smaller creature of regret that occasionally swam past.

Then there was Harnham. There, in the Northumberland countryside, I helped found a small branch monastery in 1980. Ajahn Sucitto had been the first senior monk (if only of five years), and it was there where I first got to know him properly. I was now a trustee, and at the time

of the pilgrimage there was concern about Harnham floating by in my mind. The old farmer who had rented us the cottage and later sold us the adjacent barns we developed as a meditation hall was wanting the sold land back—land we had built on. I had become very fond of him, and I even dedicated the pilgrimage to him when we set out, along with my parents. On the retreat I began to see that there was something inevitable about what had happened. The farmer had been delighted by us and the monks—for over ten years he had eaten his lunch at the monastery and had charmed every visitor—but with encroaching senility another part of him had surfaced, suspicious and miserly, a creature in his psyche he could no longer control. Old age: that too can lay bare the contents of our minds, confronting us with our past actions, both good and bad. By then, though, it is too late to do anything about it.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Venerable Somaratana dutifully took us to see the site of Savatthi one afternoon. There were excavations going on, which were exposing an old house, fancifully titled "Anathapindika's house." There were only a few remains of the capital of Kosala, and no trace of its king, Pasenadi, or his palace. Even the river, which had been a major artery for trade, had left. It was now a couple kilometres to the north.

He also took us to the site of the Pubbarama, the "Eastern Park," with the dwelling given to the Sangha by Visakha, the Buddha's greatest female lay disciple. There were no signs of the Buddha having spent six rains here. Unlike the Jetavana, the site had not been excavated—maybe because it was occupied by a small village. As we wandered round, it was only when Bhante pointed out some features that traces became apparent. You could tell that the Shiva *lingam*, for example, had once been an Ashokan column; then again some of the villager's dwellings had sections of ancient brickwork in their walls; and the wellheads were of very old brick. And suddenly from a pathway, the characteristically carved

faces of Gupta bricks peered up through the mud from which they had come long ago. But the Visakha-consciousness is surely still around, that great heart recycled into millions of devoted women who still support the *sangha* unstintingly. To them, as to her, it is a great privilege. Visakha it was who asked the Buddha to allow her, for as long as she lived, to provide cloths for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis to wear when they were bathing; to provide food for visiting *samanas*, food for those setting out on a journey, food for the sick and their nurses; and to provide medicine and "a constant supply of gruel." The Buddha was circumspect: what advantage did she see in all these gifts in terms of her own Dhamma practice? Her reply was memorable: "When I remember it I shall be glad. When I am glad, I shall be happy. When my mind is happy, my body will be tranquil. When my body is tranquil, I shall feel pleasure. When I feel pleasure, my mind will become concentrated. That will maintain the spiritual faculties in being in me, and also the spiritual powers, and also the enlightenment factors…" The Awakened One was satisfied that she was in touch with the aims of his teaching. He gave his consent.

Venerable Somaratana took us to a traditional meal offering—called *dana*—at the nearby Sri Lankan temple, the "New Jetavana." He had been the abbot there for the last four years of his twenty-one years in India but had recently retired in order to develop his meditation practice. The occasion today was of his successor's birthday, and Venerable Somaratana was the guest of honour. Life in the New Jetavana was centred around parties of Sri Lankan pilgrims making offerings of food to the Sangha; and Venerable Somaratana slotted back into the presiding role with the ease of one who has become accustomed to the benevolent mayhem of tour parties trying to organise themselves. Especially after the simplicity of the retreat, the scene was bedlam. A hundred or more pilgrims who had come a long way by coach were scrambling around, some looking at the temple, some unloading belongings, everyone excited to be at Savatthi at last. They were of all ages. Some were elderly and had to be helped around; others were children who romped

freely, generally getting in the way of the cooks who were struggling with huge vats of rice and curries. Others were holding forth, absorbed in conversation. The *sangha*, particularly the abbot and Venerable Somaratana, were a blurred focal point of all this, and tried to contain some of its energy with appropriate chants and scraps of ritual. Bhante did his bit, but the scene was much too chaotic for any teaching; after the meal he glanced at us knowingly and sidled off. We tagged along.

As we were leaving, we had a few moments to survey the huge multifaceted mural in the temple. Here were the images that confirmed the faith. Apart from the four typical scenes from the Buddha's life—his youth, his enlightenment, his first sermon, and his *parinibbana*—it was made up of twenty-seven separate portrayals of stories and incidents from the time of the Buddha right up to the present. Those that weren't commemorations of great moments in Buddhist or Sinhalese history illustrated moral themes. Anathapindika was here purchasing the Jetavana; the Pubbarama was being constructed on the shrine-room wall; there was the story of the blind monk who accidentally killed insects while doing walking meditation—"no fault" said the Buddha, there was no intention. Here the Buddha and Ananda nursed the sick bhikkhu whom his fellow bhikkhus did not want to bother with; here was the story of the bhikkhuni Uppalavanna who was raped—with the rapist subsequently being consumed by fire; near her the schismatic Devadatta was being swallowed by the earth. I couldn't place all of them, and the situation was too busy for a leisurely contemplation, but Dharmapala was there, and Ambedkar with his throng of converts, bringing Buddhism triumphantly back to India.

I shrugged at the simple conviction. It seemed to me that the only way that Buddhism was relating to India here was by providing the locals with the opportunity to sell trinkets by the gates of the temples and the park or to act as guides and watchmen. Few people seemed to be "bringing Buddhism back" by doing what the Buddha and his disciples did: meditating, going for alms, teaching people the way out of suffering. Even the tem-

ples here weren't doing that. Not that the tour-bus pilgrims could stop for long enough to meditate anyway. But didn't the Buddha say that good deeds were of less benefit to the mind than a few moments of sustained meditation? What was so good about "Buddhist" activity!

And then I noticed how unpleasant my mind was, holding on to stillness to the point of getting righteous about it! There's nothing like judging others to help veil one's own defilements. A thought kept tugging at my veil: who has the right to judge?

NICK

In the ruins of old Savatthi Bhante showed us two mounds known as Paki Kuti and Kachki Kuti, which he told us archaeologists believe were once Buddhist *stupas*, and that local legend has it that one was for Angulimala. He was a notorious murderer who, according to the scripture, had taken a vow at the instigation of his guru to kill a thousand people. He was a gruesome sight, wearing a necklace made of his victims' forefingers. He needed to take only one more life to complete his vow when he met the Buddha walking alone and unarmed through the forest, but he was unable to kill him. Instead, so impressed with the Buddha's peacefulness and lack of fear, he became a disciple, ordained as a bhikkhu, and eventually even won enlightenment. Not that he escaped the results of his previous actions. It was at Savatthi, near to where he had committed the murders, that he was recognised many years later and stoned to death by a mob. But the *suttas* say he died with equanimity. It was good to find his *stupa*, and I returned on a later day with Bhante and Ajahn Sucitto to offer incense and do some chanting.

The name Angulimala also brought up memories for me. It is the name of the Buddhist prison chaplaincy service I had been part of and I had learnt a lot from working with prisoners. Some of them even gave me good advice. Others, not quite so helpfully, offered to resolve the difficulties I later had with my boss by arranging to "'av 'im sorted." The

problems they were dealing with were often things that I knew well. But with prisoners the suffering is cruder, stripped of the refinements we add to it in ordinary life.

Once I was filling in for another chaplain at a high-security prison and meeting his three Buddhist inmates. We sat and chatted, and none of them seemed to have anything pressing to say until the prison officer put his head round the door to indicate their time was over. Then they each opened up with what was really on their mind. The first was about to be let out after a long sentence and was afraid of a changed world; the second had problems with his wife who was seeing someone else. So then I asked the third, a young lad covered in tattoos, if there was anything on his mind?

"Yeah, it's the birds."

"The birds?"

"Yeah, the birds…. When I'm meditating, they're at the window givin' it, ain't they? I try to ignore them but sometimes I just can't, and I jump up and shout out SHURR-UP!!"

I may not get upset about pigeons cooing, but in India I knew just how he felt.

Prisoners also have a much clearer view of kamma. I spent a couple of years seeing two young murderers every week. They had both committed their crimes in their teens and were now nearly ten years into their life sentences. They spoke openly about their crimes and the effect it had on them. They told me that they had to re-live the crime every night. One, who had been the accomplice to a shooting, said that every time a door banged suddenly, the scene, and an overpowering sense of remorse, flashed into his mind. They were the lucky ones: at least they could face that endlessly replaying loop in their heads. Others who had committed more premeditated crimes couldn't face it and had retreated into their own strange worlds.

Lifers in British prisons are usually let out eventually. It's at the system's discretion, and they have to show remorse and contrition to earn

it. So they learn to give the standard answers to everyone they meet. As a visiting chaplain I was not part of that, and with me they would share their real feelings, and insights. One of those young murderers helped me with another prisoner I was meeting who was really suffering remorse. He told him how remorse was right but it was only a stage. After eight years of it himself—blaming himself, regretting what he had done, feeling rotten about his victim, just an unthinking hard kid like himself—he had realised he needed to forgive himself and to see that he was not all bad. It struck me as wise—though he could never have told that to "the system."

Having learnt so much from my visits to prisoners, it was good to pay respects on their behalf at Angulimala's shrine. I brought each of them I could remember to mind, and shared with them the blessings of our pilgrimage. They deserved it. Prison is an atrocious place to try to practise stillness, peace, and equanimity, but some of the occupants are determined to finally start dealing with their conditioning. But it does have one thing going for it: it gives time to reflect. In ordinary life we can stay busy till we die.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Nick, Venerable Nimalo, and myself all spent time cleaning up the monastery. In the last few days, we also joined Bhante at the Jetavana, sweeping around the Anandabodhi tree—a tree supposedly planted by Ananda for people to hang offerings to the Buddha upon. It was a pleasantly calm, unassuming kind of activity, no big personal thing. Other activities seemed more personal and somehow "wrong." Writing letters to people: "a distraction;" writing in the diary: "pretentious." But wasn't the self-judgement the stronger, more unskilful action than the activities themselves? Why take a stand against action?

After all bhikkhu life had involved me in plenty of it. When our community moved from Oaken Holt to Chithurst, an enormous amount of

reconstruction and building work had to be done, with very little capital. So it was basically bhikkhu labour for five years. Not that that was a Western aberration: in some of Ajahn Chah's monasteries in Thailand, bhikkhus would be involved with construction work for years. And for some the results are good: it stimulates a sense of selflessness and of group harmony. And as with other duties, including meditation, some people develop patience, wisdom, and balance, whilst others get obsessive…and most of us learn by wobbling in between. Selfless dispassionate action doesn't arise before experiencing a good amount of self and passion coming and going in one's own mind and that of others. It was the procedures governing the action that kept it all within the framework of contemplation—from the training in ethics and etiquette to the ways of adjudication and even building regulations. All this was Vinaya, *samana dharma*, laid down by the Buddha himself.

He had to; and he had to keep revising it throughout his lifetime. Because within a few years, the position of his *samana* disciples changed from that of outcasts wandering alone or in small groups to an increasingly settled community with dwellings and established lay support. Standards and procedures had to be adjusted continually to meet the changes. Once dwellings had been allowed and monasteries set up, then lodgings officers had to be appointed, and bhikkhus to look after the stores, and (because the Buddha saw a poor tailor making a hopeless mess of building a dwelling for the Sangha) bhikkhus to oversee building works. During his lifetime, some bhikkhus even became specialists in building. As a far-ranging code then, the Vinaya is the record of the Buddha's response to the activities that we simplistically divide into "spiritual" and "mundane." It handles action from a place of stillness—like meditation.

Of course "action" isn't purely an external thing. There's plenty going on in the mind. And the more you recognise that your ideas about yourself and your notions of ultimate truth and the path all occur in a mind that is riddled with fantasy and trickier than a waggon-load of mon-

keys, the more you appreciate daily-life activity as a touchstone—particularly if it involves other people with their ways of doing things and your reactions to that. I began to compare my sweeping with that of Venerable Nimalo—was I doing my fair share of the work?—and then let go of the anxiety.

Then there was Stefano. What weird tantric practice was he up to? We'd meet briefly, occasionally, united in the *dharma* of washing up; gradually small conversations formed. After our formal retreat we got together. He and Helene asked for a blessing for the baby to be, so I did some chanting and things opened up. Tantra, he explained, was mostly about visualisation, implanting Buddha and benevolent images on one's own form and consciousness…and giving a lot of blessings. He had been cultivating tantric practices for fifteen years, and after a few initial retreats had taken up the life of a Tibetan monk for the last ten years, mostly in Nepal. "All my life," he said "I wanted just two things. One, if I could learn to be a little more compassionate. The other, if I could just once see ultimate truth. That would be enough for one lifetime." For a Westerner, that's humility.

Washing up is such a good *dharma*. We enjoyed Stefano, his naturalness and his trust in his practice. The context of another contemplative is a blessing, a way of recognising one's own biases and the common ground. Talking to him energised me again for the half-moon vigil, to take full advantage of the opportunity that our stay here presented. I sat out with a candle at the Gandhakuti, looking for the way out of suffering, half knowing that "looking for" wasn't what it was about.

> *The liberated one does not seek anything that is seen, heard, or thought. He does not seek purity through anything else, for he has neither passion nor dispassion.*

Action and stillness. I've been caught between those apparent opponents for many a year. If I'm doing something, particularly if it interests me, there's the guilty shadow muttering "Should be meditating,

you're distracting yourself, getting caught up…," and when I'm in meditation, the occasional twinge: "Should be working, you're not facing up to responsibilities, selfish…." And as our time at Savatthi drew to a close: "I don't want to go on, there's nowhere to go, better meditate…." "Have to go on, not finished yet." And even now, in writing this, the opposing forces glower at each other: "I don't want to keep writing this, it's a waste of time…." "You have to continue, can't stop now." Here I am with this.

"Fulfil all your duties; action is better than inaction…Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit." Thus spoke Krishna to Arjuna in the conflict of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Here is good and there is evil: he should wage war for righteousness' sake.

But I can't do that. Here I am, a pilgrim; I can't take sides between action and stillness, can't wipe one out with the other. There's no duty but to stop suffering—and that means finding out where it starts. And if I'm fully aware at that point of contact, before self arises, action and stillness cease to be opposites. Watch…and a moment at a time, there's a blessing.



23

The First Goodbye

AJAHN SUCITTO

It was time to get on the road again. In the heart, time is measured with departure. Sometimes it's the casual daily "see you later"; sometimes it's a reluctant letting go; sometimes it comes through being violently dragged away from the company of friends, family, and the good earth.

Even in little over three weeks, we had grown accustomed to the humble monastery and the Jetavana, and fond of Venerable Somaratana, with his quiet concern for our welfare. Venerable Nimalo had left on March 9th and gone to Sarnath to get his passport before entering Nepal, having made provisional arrangements to meet up with us at Lumbini. Three days later, we said good-bye to Bhante after an early breakfast. The rest of the tiny resident *sangha* turned up to see us off. Bhante seemed a bit sad and gave me his last jar of Marmite and some vitamin pills, with a few disjointed phrases about wanting to help our pilgrimage. We promised to write and offered to support him if he came to England. Nick made further donations, and we fitted our packs back into the disused ruts in our backs and set off through the Jetavana.

In that spring-like mood it seemed right to stop off at a *stupa* on the main road towards Balrampur, which although long since covered with earth and vegetation was built on the site in which, tradition has it, the

Buddha ascended from the earth to visit his mother in the Tusita heaven realm. The story goes that he spent an entire rains season up there teaching the Abhidhamma to her and to attendant *devas*. I didn't think my mother would be interested in the Abhidhamma, but the example of filial piety was not lost on us. We climbed halfway up the mound's slope to light incense and recollect our mothers with gratitude.

It was good we did that. Receiving a letter from my brother later in Balrampur, I opened it to learn that, early in the morning of February 13th, my mother had died. There was also a card from the *sangha* at Amaravati expressing their condolences; they had attended the funeral. I sat down. Then I read the letter a few times: she had died peacefully, in her sleep. The nurses had looked in at 1:00 A.M. and she was asleep; two hours later, her position was unchanged but there was no breathing. Well, the peacefulness was good. I looked inwardly for an emotion or a sign; all was silence, but I knew I needed to say good-bye.

We had planned to take a train towards Kapilavatthu to make up for the time that we had spent in Savatthi and allow ourselves two full months in Nepal. With the descent of the silence, I hardly noticed the slow train ride, there was just that unrelenting vision of India even as we left it: a mass of bodies—bodies stuffed in and under the seats, hanging out of the doors; bodies jammed in the windows as people forced their way through into the packed carriage. Darkness came and eventually we arrived at a station near a town called Naugarh. Near the station were a couple of small Buddhist temples set up for the convenience of pilgrims. One was Burmese, the other an outpost of the Maha Bodhi Society. This night I wanted a shrine where I could do some chanting for my mother.

The Burmese place would have made space for us by evicting a family from a room; we declined. The Maha Bodhi temple was surrounded by a wall. The gate eventually opened, and we entered a tiny shrine room with a dusty Buddha image sitting behind two large alms bowls, each with a sign advocating donations, one in English and one in Hindi. The

resident monk, an Indian, received us with a broad ingratiating smile and asked if we had any gifts from England for him. Nick replied in the negative but offered fifty rupees as a contribution to the temple for a night's stay. The monk recommended a larger donation, which would be of greater merit; it was very important to make merit and one hundred rupees would be more suitable. My silence went darker as they haggled: what a sight to be leaving India with—a bhikkhu wheedling for money with simpering platitudes about our spiritual welfare! Nick explained that he had only one hundred rupees and that his friend was a fellow bhikkhu, and ill; he didn't want to give it all and be in a situation where he couldn't provide support. To cash a traveller's cheque would leave him with a wad of unconvertible Indian rupees when he got to Nepal. And wasn't generosity supposed to be a free-will thing? My mind froze. Something in me was for getting up and out of this place; but when Nick took the register and pointed out that fifty rupees was the standard donation, the bhikkhu reluctantly recognised that we would not gain much merit. A lay attendant led us to a nearly bare unswept room.

In the morning I had unfrozen enough to act from direct instinct. It was before dawn, but I was for getting out. The gate was locked and the surrounding wall about three metres high and topped with broken glass. But that was nothing. I wanted out. With Nick behind me I got a foot in the gate's rails and used that somehow to scramble up and over the wall. On the other side the road was empty. Away! Away down a long wide road out of India.

When it was light we stopped for tea to warm up. My head throbbed and I felt sick. Then the road became wider and lined with trees, some blooming with red flowers. A young man walked alongside us for a way talking an incessant jumble of high-speed disconnected sentences; the land stretched on either side as far as the eye could see; the light was bright but soft. India was saying good-bye. And it expected a response. Now, to be very patient, to pass the test at last, no matter what! So I gave

the young man all the kindness, all the attention that I could, and eventually bid him farewell. On behalf of it all.

Perhaps I couldn't make it in India—it was just too much for me—but there were no hard feelings. Years ago I had been attracted to India because of its profound spiritual literature, the vastness of its thought, and the beauty of its music and painting. This time I had mostly seen the low life, yet the simple devotion, the unquestioning generosity, and the respect for religious people were humbling. I blessed the place for its persistent vitality and its ability to accommodate opposites: its contradictory serenity and passion, its harmlessness and violence. What other place could be so obsessed with cleanliness and bathing and yet so innocently filthy? Where else do cows and monkeys roam the streets recycling the waste? Here, the problems that are innate in civilisation, including matters that Western societies manage to push under the carpet, dump in the sea, or export to other countries, get exposed. Here every latent impurity that ease and convenience can leave dormant gets dredged up from the bottom of the heart and shoved in your face. India was a great teacher. But right now I had to get out, to get to Lumbini for the 16th, my mother's birthday. India had taught me a little about *dharma*.

NICK

It wasn't how I had expected to be leaving India when sitting in the Jeta Grove. There the future seemed rosy, and I had been looking forward to crossing the border and to saying good-bye. But I should have known that India was not going to let us off so easily. The news of the death of Ajahn Sucitto's mother followed by that awful stay in the Maha Bodhi *vihara* left a bitter taste.

At least it was good to be walking. The road was bordered with neat lines of young trees, their trunks painted with three wide bands of faded red, white, and red. Their shade alleviated the heat. While we were at

Savatthi I had noticed that sunrise was getting earlier and sunset later. Now I felt the result and appreciated those trees. The change of season also meant the fields we were passing were now full of mature wheat, their heads and upper leaves on the turn from green to golden so that they rustled in the breeze. Most of the water from the rainy season had gone, and the birds had been condensed from the wider landscape to congregate at the few remaining pools. One we passed contained a dozen elegant black-winged stilts poking at the mud. Soon, before all the water dried up, such migrants would be leaving, returning north to their nesting sites amidst the tundra of Siberia.

We stopped for a breakfast of tea and sweet biscuits in Naugarh town, three kilometres on from the *vihara* at Naugarh station, and then we headed north on a road that seemed far too wide and well paved for the small amount of traffic. I realised why when we got to the fork and the road for Piprahwa, where we were heading. The other direction, where the good road went, was signposted "LUMBINI 35 KM." This had been the route for pilgrims and tourists to Lumbini until Nepal had closed the border crossing. Then things began to fall into place. Visitors must once have stayed at Naugarh and crossed into Nepal for the day. Now they had to go the long way round and so stay the night in Nepal and spend their money there. The flow of Buddhist pilgrims through Naugarh had dried to a trickle, and that was why the monk had been so desperate to extract every last penny from any visitor.

It was at that junction that I also began to realise that my plan to cross quietly into Nepal between Piprahwa and Lumbini, and so avoid being sent by the border officials to New Delhi for new visas, might not be as easy as I had surmised. There was a police post and check point on the Lumbini road, and there were likely to be more at the border.

The last thing I wanted to do was to sneak round a border post. Stefano had told us the story of a friend who had tried that when he overstayed his Nepali visa. He decided to do it at night and went to great lengths: dressing himself up as a local, dyeing his face and wrapping an

old scarf about his head. He had stolen quietly through the fields on a moonless night and was coming round the back of the Nepali border buildings, so that he could register on the Indian side, when in the darkness he had fallen into a ditch with the sewage outflow. His cry, as he realised what he had landed in, brought one of the guards out to investigate, and he was caught full beam in the guard's flashlight. He was so caked in sewage, though, that the guard did not want to come near enough to see who he was. He just assumed he was some drunken peasant and told him to get lost.

The Piprahwa road was smaller: a raised mound with a narrow strip of asphalt on it, crossing the fields. The landscape was empty, and more open, reminding us of Nepal. There were no trees shading the road, and so when we arrived at the Sri Lankan temple at 10:00 A.M. we were hot and sweaty. The temple was small, square, and new-looking, a pile of bricks in front indicating it was still being built. Yet despite the newness, several mud homes had already coalesced around it to make a small huddle of buildings amidst the fields. Inside we were warmly welcomed by Ven. Jinaratana, a Sri Lankan bhikkhu in his forties who was pleased to have two Westerners, one a bhikkhu, come to stay. He and his companion, a more junior Indian monk whose name has gone now, made quite a fuss of us. They would have given us their rooms—there were only two in the temple—had we not insisted that we were happy on the roof. The generosity was a great relief after Naugarh.

It was also interesting to see one of these pilgrim temples in the making. Up to now they had been long established, sometimes so long ago that the founder only remained as a statue in the courtyard. Founders still in residence had grown old and had settled back into the buildings and amenities that had arisen around them. But here at Piprahwa was a young bhikkhu, still making his mark in the holy land.

Ven. Jinaratana had begun his temple only ten years before our visit. The shrine room, he told us as he showed us round, had been completed just the previous year. Next they were building an accommodation block

for pilgrims—that was what the bricks were for. He was friendly, helpful, and likeable. He told us which ruins to visit that afternoon and their significance. He responded to our intention to walk directly to Lumbini not with surprise but by announcing he would find out the route; he had never done it himself because of the border, but he knew it was possible. He was an energetic and busy man with little time to listen to anything except practical details. I supposed they were all like that, these founders of temples in the holy land.

That afternoon it was my turn with the dysentery, so although we managed to get round the ruins, it was slow going and neither of us, for very different reasons, took much of it in. All I remember were two landscapes of old bricks, one of which was the remains of a big *stupa*, the other was an extensive mound that was supposed to be the foundations of Kapilavatthu (Sanskrit: Kapilavastu), the town where the Buddha grew up.

This was the second Kapilavatthu we had visited on the pilgrimage; the first we had walked to from Lumbini. Having now journeyed nearly a complete circle, that Kapilavatthu was now just across the border in Nepal. Although on this visit neither of us cared which was the real one, I should record what I have found out since.

It was the German archaeologist Fuhrer who first proposed the Nepalese site. After his discovery of the Ashokan column at Lumbini in 1896, he obtained a commission from the Nepalese government to search elsewhere in their *terai* districts for Kapilavatthu. Despite extensive excavations at Tilaurakot, which destroyed much of the remains, and an utter conviction that this was the site, he could find no conclusive evidence. When another archaeologist made a surprise visit towards the end of the dig he discovered the workers inscribing pre-Ashokan writing on some of the bricks—Fuhrer had descended to forgery to prove his case.

Meanwhile, just across the border in British India, a local English landowner had excavated a large *stupa* and discovered a relic casket. He suggested that the site in Piprahwa must be Kapilavatthu. That was when

the scholars started to squabble. It was claimed that the distance and direction from Lumbini given by Fa Hsien in the account of his visit in 406 C.E. matched up with the Indian site. Hsuan Tsiang's account of his visit in 635 was said to indicate that Nepalese site was the correct site. With time the consensus seemed to plump for Tilaurakot, but perhaps only because Nepal cared more—they only have Lumbini while India had all the other Buddhist holy sites.

Then in 1972 a re-excavation of the Piprahwa *stupa* found two more relic caskets further down, containing ashes, and then an excavation of a nearby monastery exposed bricks engraved "Kapilavastu bhikshu sangha." The Nepalese did not take it well. In the words of the Indian archaeologist who made the discovery, "the news gathered a blinding storm around it…and a number of scholars, mainly from Nepal, took recourse to the most unbecoming language." And it was after that that Nepal closed the local border and forced everyone to go the long way round.

So that is how the Nepalese Kapilavatthu ceased to be visited and became the sleepy place with a closed museum we had found. But I incline to the view of Vincent Smith, the archaeologist who discovered Fuhrer's forgery. With a true Englishman's sense of fair play, he suggested that *both* sites might be Kapilavatthu. The explanation resides with a story that matched the sombre mood we were in because of Ajahn Sucitto's news: how the Buddha, towards the end of his life, had to stand back and let his home town be razed to the ground by Vidudabha, the new king of Kosala.

Kosala was then a powerful state, and the Buddha's kindred, the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu, were its vassals. Vidudabha's mother had supposedly been a Sakyan princess given in marriage to his father. But, in reality, because the proud Sakyans had felt that the upstart Kosalans were beneath them, they had sent a daughter that one of their chiefs had fathered with a slave girl. The king never suspected and made her his foremost queen. The truth only emerged later when, with that irony

that life always seems to manage, he was to be succeeded by the son he had by that queen, the proud Vidudabha. Having grown up wondering why he never received presents from his mother's family, Vidudabha visited Kapilavatthu as a prince. He found out the truth when one of his soldiers, returning to collect a forgotten spear, found a slave washing the seat that Vidudabha had sat on, with milk and water. "The son of a slave has sat on this seat," explained the slave. When Vidudabha heard this he vowed revenge: "Let them pour milk over my seat to purify it. When I am king I will wash the place with the blood of their hearts."

The Buddha did what he could to protect his kindred from Vidudabha. On three occasions when the new king set out with an army he met the Buddha just inside the Sakyan kingdom sitting under a small shadeless tree. Vidudabha invited him instead to cross the border into Kosala where there was a big shady banyan, but the Buddha replied, "Be not concerned, King, the shade of my kinsmen keeps me cool." The king understood and returned to Kosala. However, when the king set out a fourth time, the Buddha knew that the fate of the Sakyans could not be averted and remained away. Vidudabha vented his wrath and "killed all the people he found without caring whether they were man or child." That must have been a heart-rending way to say good-bye, even for a Buddha.

The town was later re-established elsewhere by the survivors, and it was this Kapilavatthu that received one eighth of the Buddha's ashes. So while India's Kapilavatthu would be the new one, with the *stupa*, Nepal's could still be the original one where the Buddha grew up. But then I'm an Englishman too.

Back at the *vihara* we were temporarily raised out of our listless state by Ven. Jinaratana, who wanted to discuss the details of our departure. He had been to see his contacts in the village and had directions for two routes to Lumbini, a guide had been arranged to lead us along the first part, and he had already decided which of the two routes we should take. He reminded me of Rabbit in *Winnie the Pooh*, forever busy organ-

ising his unreliable friends and relations. At the time, as I struggled to get my mind focused on what we were supposed to be doing, I felt like one of the more hopeless friends. And Ajahn Sucitto was even worse. He would just stare absent-mindedly out of the window.

After evening *puja* that night, we lay on the roof under the stars. Wafting up from the mud huts around us, along with the last of the smoke from the evening fires, came the evocative sound of the murmuring of female voices. Women, I imagined, lying in bed beside their husbands, going over the doings of the day. Occasionally I could hear one of the men grunt or speak a short sentence, but mostly it was the soft murmuring.

It brought to my mind the woman I had just effectively said goodbye to forever. I had sent her the letter when we reached Balrampur, composed at the end of the retreat in Savatthi. It had taken me a year of trying, and four months of the pilgrimage, to do it, but then part of me didn't want to. I had loved her, and now lying there I could see how much she had meant to me. It always seems to be like that. It's only when someone's gone that you can truly see how much you care.

Perhaps, in a way, we were both in India getting over women. With Ajahn Sucitto it was the nuns. For the previous eight years he had been in charge of their training. It was a job that fell to him when the community had only monks who had been trained in Thailand but women who wanted to become nuns. It was a long painful lesson for all. He likened leading their regular lessons on their rules to being at the helm of a ship in a storm, with the emotions of their reactions pouring over him while he hung on grimly to the wheel. One of the nuns told me later that she regularly wanted to kill him. But there was also a deep affection. The first generation were now senior enough to take charge of their own training and of those that followed, and they now looked on Ajahn Sucitto with great kindness. At the last post office there had been a long letter for him from one of them.

For much of the pilgrimage, women, and relationships with them,

had been a regular topic of conversation—I suspect it always will be for men. But, with the death of his mother we weren't having much conversation. He lay there silently that night looking up at the stars as I fell off to sleep.

Next morning the lightening of the sky before dawn was greeted with calls to prayer from a nearby mosque played over the usual crackling tannoy system. Then there was a splutter and a megaphone attached to our roof also started up, blasting out a stream of Buddhist *paritta* chanting. We were already at the table downstairs for an early breakfast, but even there it drowned the conversation. It was Ven. Jinaratana's answer to the Muslims, who, he told us, made up 90 percent of the local village—part of his drive to found a Buddhist temple in the holy land.

Soon after that we left, setting out early so we were less likely to be seen crossing the border. Our guide led us to the start of the path, and then we were on our own, wandering along a dirt track and looking out for Nepal, with no idea how we would know when we got there. We walked on a raised earth mound winding through a vast wetland. Some of it had been planted with paddy, but mostly it was swamp and open water with the occasional stunted tree on an island of dry land. Everywhere there were birds. Storks and sarus cranes waded amongst the reeds, herons flapped off, startled by our approach, various ducks slipped out of sight into the vegetation, and a big pallas's fish eagle quartered in the distance. In the east the sun had just risen, and everything was picked out with the intensity that the low morning light can give. It was a wonderful place, but we could not stop; I was still concerned someone would find us before we crossed into Nepal.

We halted farther on in some woodland in a discreet glade. Ajahn Sucitto sat in meditation while I stole back to take another look from the bushes at the wetlands. I had reckoned we were over the border by then, but when we came out onto open rising ground there, in the middle of nowhere particular, was a stone post marking the border There was no one at all to be seen, let alone border guards. We turned east, heading

for Lumbini, across a land even less developed than at Piprahwa. It was undulating and covered in wheat rippling in a warm wind coming from the north. There were only a few distant villages. A male pallid harrier, grey and white, hunted low over the wheat, flapping slowly back and forth beside us, and beyond, in the distance, were mountains again. We had not seen them since we headed south four months earlier. The air was now too hazy to see the distant snow-covered peaks, but we could see, beyond the forested foothills, the first crests of the higher ranges.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Saying good-bye was never easy. And Mother India wasn't about to let us go without a little sport, *maya*, a little play. First there were the wetlands. They were unreal, just the kind of thing to get Nick so spellbound that we were moored there for an hour. I sat and waited, letting go of the foreboding that despite making an early start, we were going to conclude the morning in the time-honoured fashion of stomping through the heat to arrive somewhere where we would have just time to stuff some food down. Ah yes, and as we left the woodland and came onto a cultivated plain that was open to the blazing sky, Nick began to wilt. He slowed up, made it to the first (and only) tree and sank down. All the energy of the wetlands was gone, the spell had lifted, and the reality of his queasy guts replaced it. The play had shifted, to expose the futility of our expectations.

Nick the crusader was gone. Now his bushy beard hardly seemed to fit him; he looked like some sad little man wearing a fake. The irritation in me melted to see him. What could we do? Just sit here, under this one tree, in the middle of a plain, waiting.... Over to the east the horizon was smudged with trees—that must be Lumbini grove! A wild mood caught my heart: could I pick him up, could I carry him? The possibility of actually accomplishing *something* that I had set out to do in this country; that dazzling possibility that I might be in charge of my destiny, just

once, fired my nerve endings. But Mother wasn't about to allow that: I had to stay with the Way It Is and give up the ideas.

Nick: he was real enough. Now it was his turn to be morose and unresponsive. Dear Nick! Actually there was nothing to be done: this is where we belonged, under a tree, sick, going nowhere, and trying to make peace with that. This is what one thousand kilometres of walking had been: preparation for understanding the human condition.

My frustration gradually evaporated, and eventually, we were allowed to continue. Nick hauled himself up and we moved off in silence, two tramps tottering across the earth to their illusory horizon.

The trees were, of course, not Lumbini grove. However, amongst them was a tiny village with a *chai* stall. After another rest in the shade, and duly fortified with tea and biscuits, some life came back to my friend. Destinations looked likely again. Lumbini was only two kilometres away, they said. But wait!…they meant Lumbini *village*, not Lumbini *grove*… and do you really think "two kilometres" is a distance? In *maya's* country, it's just bait for expectation. Because when we arrived at Lumbini village—which was a Muslim market place—Lumbini grove was only "two kilometres" away. And so we concluded the morning by stomping through the heat, this time to arrive at Venerable Vimalananda's temple with about five minutes left in which to stuff down some food.

Some other bhikkhus were there eating. An obvious elder knowingly waved us to get down to business as rice and noodle soup were hastily set down in front of us. Wasn't this where we began, a thousand kilometres ago?

The place was much the same, although our four-month journey seemed to have made it smaller. The manager was the same, still saying "No problem, no problem" as he took us to the same room and helped us sweep it out. The abbot, Venerable Vimalananda, was the same—bright and bird-like, though slightly subdued by the presence of an elder monk, Venerable Anuruddha Mahathera. Venerable Anuruddha, a bhikkhu of fifty-four rains and the third most senior bhikkhu in Nepal, was the

abbot of the renowned Anandakuti *Vihara* in Kathmandu; in fact his father, Venerable Dhammaloka, had founded the place. Not that he was anything but relaxed and friendly; he took an interest in our journey and even talked to us a little on Dhamma.

Venerable Vimalananda stayed in the background and occupied himself with administrative details. However, over the subsequent few days, I helped him to write a letter to a supporter in Sri Lanka in his crowded little room. He fished out a bag of Sri Lankan coffee and some tea mixed with coriander as a gift; he was happy to be helpful and delighted that we intended to spend some time in his temple that was being built in Tansen, a few days' walk to the north. With characteristic energy he set to, writing a letter to his brother, Chhatra Raj Shakya, a prominent Buddhist in the town. And, he briefly informed us, "Nimalo is here. In Tilaurakot."

We had arrived the day before the new moon on March 15th, and March 16th was my mother's birthday. The silence in the back of my mind felt pleased. The manager had loaned us a paraffin stove ("No problem, no problem!"), and with the tea or the coffee and a mild night by Queen Maha Maya's tank, there could be no more suitable occasion to pay my respects and send some kindness towards my mother.

The night was still and quiet; long streamers, decked with prayer flags, ran from the temple across the dark water to the bodhi tree where I sat. After the *puja*, Nick moved off; we met up again at midnight in the room for coffee. A few hours of meditation had helped me digest a lot of emotions and memories. There was some pathos and regret. It must be difficult for all mothers to have their sons grow up and no longer be sweet little boys who depend upon them. My relationship with my mother didn't seem to have progressed since I was eleven. We had never had an adult conversation. I changed into a stranger who had no interests in the norms of family life: didn't want a career, didn't know what I was going to do, was always going off to some foreign country for months on end. And for me, she was always either dismissive or unin-

terested in the things that were passions for me: my studies, my music, my friends, my attempts at a personal philosophy. Yet I always wrote to her, came back from Thailand and stayed in England to support her, and whenever people offered me something, I chose flowers to send to her. As for her, even though she would not pick up the baited conversational gambits on Buddhism that I carefully laid, she knitted gloves and baked cakes for the Sangha. Once when I was visiting and she thought I was out, I peeked through the window to see her sitting bolt upright with her eyes closed, obviously attempting to meditate. Ours was a secret relationship: separated by our lifestyles, it was as if we couldn't acknowledge that we cared, face to face. So we had to do it indirectly.

At 3:00 A.M. we had the morning *puja* by the flickering candle against the bodhi tree. The night must have been chilly—I suddenly felt quite shaky as I spread out my piece of paper with the dedication to my mother on it. A membrane around my emotions started to stretch under the pressure and grow thin. There was my mother's name and: "may you forgive and be forgiven, bless and be blessed, realise peace, and spread it to all beings. In gratitude for your kindness, patience, and support, your loving son." I got halfway through it with the shivering running up my chest and something trembling in my stomach. Then a great wave burst through, filled my throat, stung my eyes, and I was sobbing.For a lot of things: for the lack of communication, for the wrongness of not being there when she died, for the way it is on this plane of separation and death. And for that ignorance that keeps us apart in hard-skinned ego-structures that yet cry out for companionship. *Maya!* She was wringing me out again, dumping my mind down that black hole of unknowing and impotence.

But not so bad this time. Nick's silence was calming. I drew a mug of water from the tank and chanted the "reflections on the sharing of merit." Then I lit the paper and let it burn, the embers dropping into the mug of water, while we recited the verse on impermanence:

All compounded things are impermanent,
having the nature to arise and cease.
Having come to be they must surely end,
and in their passing there is peace.

I sat there until 6:00 A.M. Then the uniformed night began to disrobe into colours and forms. Summoned by bird song, the earth came back, exhaling a cool mist. It was time to move again. Where was there to go? I wandered north with my mug in my hand. Only a few minutes walk away was the Flame of Eternal Peace, though in daylight it wasn't so bright as at night. Instead, its stark brilliance was dissipated. Illusion again…how bright is a flame? As bright as the darkness. How clear is truth? As clear as the ignorance it reveals. And peace, what is that? Something mobile and flowing, yet always resting on one spot; something whose heart is eternal, yet whose forms are transient. *Maya*—the flickering of form. I dipped my mug into the flames, passing it through them three times. That's how much you can hold in the world of form…. Better to burn up utterly, with abandonment.

I returned to the temple still not interested in sleep, so I spent my time washing my robes and peacefully sweeping leaves in the grounds of the temple. We'd said good-bye to Nick the Strong and Sucitto the Impervious, but I had a feeling that Mother was going to stay with us. Even when you've said them, good-byes are never as straightforward as that; some things just keep coming back.

NICK

This visit to Lumbini was much more sombre than the last. I again spent much of the time alone exploring the area and the wildlife, but this time it was out of a wish to give more space to my companion rather than out of excitement at being somewhere new. His mood flavoured the whole visit.

There were new things to discover though, like a loud call that was everywhere at dawn and dusk. It sounded like the slow stuttering creak of a door in a horror movie. To begin with I thought it was frogs, big bullfrogs. But it was coming from low bushes and clumps of grass a long way from anywhere I would expect frogs. Eventually I crept up on one of the grass clumps; the noise stopped, and in a minor explosion a black partridge broke cover.

It was spring, and the partridges were the most obvious of the birds now calling to establish breeding territories. Those I had heard at Savatthi were here, too, like the green barbet, the coppersmith, and the crazy brainfever bird, while the wetland birds I had been watching last time had mostly gone, along with the shallow pools they had been feeding in. Those areas were now flowering grasslands.

The holy site had changed subtly too. The annual winter pilgrimage had passed through while we were away, and the place was now strung with lines of new brightly coloured prayer flags instead of a few old tattered ones. The pilgrims would have come in waves, each of the different nationalities in sequence: the Thais visiting the holy places in November and December, the Tibetans and Japanese in mid-winter, and the Sri Lankans in February and March (the choice depending on their climate at home). Now it was mid-March, and the plains were heating up, the pilgrims were gone, and the bodhi trees, from which the flags were strung, were changing their leaves, dropping the old ones while unfolding small green replacements.

But some things were the same. Ven. Vimalananda still bustled about. The two lads in the small make-shift cafe in the yard had the same bored air as they waited for visitors to arrive while listening to the same tinny Indian pop songs on their transistor radio. The office workers at the Lumbini Development Project were still on strike and sitting behind a desk outside the office when I went to visit. The stakes had been raised, however, and there was now a big sign hanging from the desk proclaiming "HUNGER STRIKE." Not that the two slightly portly men behind

the desk looked like they were suffering much. When I asked, they told me they were taking turns at refusing food. They were each doing six-hour stints. Hardly a Gandhi-like fast.

I had called by to enquire if there was somewhere I could buy a tree for Ajahn Sucitto to plant for his mother. They directed me to the project's nursery round the back. This was two huts surrounded by rows of young trees, the area fenced off with netting. Here there was no strike, but then the two men watering the trees were local Indian peasants, not educated Nepalese down from the hills. Although they had enough English to grasp what I wanted, whether they understood why I wanted to plant a tree I'm not so sure. Anyway they would take no money, though I did manage eventually to give them a tip, and I returned bearing two potted flowering trees.

Ajahn Sucitto was very pleased. He spent much of the afternoon deciding where to put them and plumped for the kitchen garden of the *vihara*, where they would be looked after. He reckoned his mother would be pleased by the choice, as she liked kitchens more than temples.

I gave the manager instructions on how to tend the trees, and I used some of our little remaining money to make a donation to the monastery and to provide a special meal in his mother's memory. They bought a dozen eggs, and I helped with the cooking by making a Spanish omelette. Meanwhile Ajahn Sucitto drew a picture of one of the flowers as a memory.

Then we made plans with Ven. Vimalanda for our departure. He said it would be no problem for us to visit the Nepali side of the border to get our passports stamped. He understood why we were doing it, too, and he used it as another opportunity to lambast government bureaucracy. There was a bus in the morning we could take, and from there we could catch another to Butwal, which had a Theravadan *vihara* where we could stay. That would save us a day's walking, much of which we had done already, and make it easier to fit in a stop at Tansen. That was his home town and, having heard on our last visit how much his new

temple project meant to him, we had offered to pay a visit. Tansen was due north, in the mountains on the road to Pokhara. We were supposed to be walking east before turning north to cross the mountains and end our pilgrimage at Kathmandu. But it felt a kind thing to do.

That afternoon we also went to visit the adjacent Tibetan temple. We had, for some reason, not bothered on the last visit, but this time we both wanted to pay our respects. Perhaps it was the coming climb into the Himalayas. Typically Tibetan, it was a square block of a building, its plain shape compensated for by the vibrant maroon and yellow of the exterior paintwork. Inside it was more gloomy, lit only by the open doorway, and smelt of old incense, rancid butter, and the many Tibetans that had shuffled through. The season of pilgrimage being over, there was just one nun in a corner clicking at a rosary and mumbling her prayers. We lit incense and placed them in a bowl overflowing with the stubs of previous sticks on the dusty altar beside the used butter lamps and the various bowls of other offerings. Beyond them the images rose, a Buddha *rupa,* various exotic bodhisattvas and behind them, the back wall filled with images of past teachers in this lineage, each in its own dusty glass box and each with a small white scarf about its neck. It was all so cluttered, but yet powerful. The nun told us that the temple was founded by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the massive old monk who had led the *puja* we attended in Bodh Gaya.

The Tibetans were the last to come to the holy places before the dark ages of Muslim destruction, and my favourite account is by one of them. He is called Dharmasvamin in Sanskrit but is known to the Tibetans as Chag Lotsawa, and he set out from Tibet in 1236. He spent over two years in India surviving many adventures. There were now hordes of Muslim soldiers roaming the country, looting and killing, and in many of the places he visited the people of the towns were hiding in the jungle fearing further visits. The monasteries he passed had mostly been destroyed, and the monks had either been killed or had fled. When he finally got to Bodh Gaya the town was deserted, but a few days later

they began to return. The local raja came out of hiding in the forest on an elephant bedecked with jewels and accompanied by five hundred foot soldiers.

He also recounts having to withstand the temptations of an "impudent" low-caste woman, the numerous tigers, bears, and "snakes the thickness of a man's thigh" in the jungle and the gigantic crocodiles of the Ganges that regularly ate ferry passengers. He visited Nalanda, from which most of the thousands of monks had fled and where there was much destruction. There he became the disciple of an old learned monk, a monk he later saved from a Muslim attack by carrying him on his back to a hiding place.

He left Nalanda to return home carrying the scriptures he had managed to collect. Then at the base of the Himalayas, when he too was about to leave India, he was struck down by fever—malaria I guess. He was delirious and came so near to death that his landlord urged him to go to the charnel ground so that he could die there, but he refused and, after several months, recovered enough to move on. He said good-bye to the plains and climbed slowly back into the mountains. With the end of his account the record of Buddhism in the Middle Land also comes to an end. There are no other records from subsequent pilgrims and, although the faith probably did hang on in a few pockets, it eventually died out completely. From what we had seen while there, it was unlikely to return.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Venerable Nimalo had arrived from Tilaurakot later on in the morning of my mother's birthday. He added to the chanting with which we blessed the two trees that Nick had acquired for my mother. We'd be together for a day or so before we all headed off to Bhairahawa. There, having officially entered Nepal, Nick and I would head north for Butwal, Tansen, and the mountains. Nimalo's horizon was the flat land to the

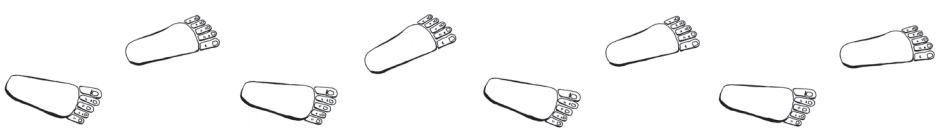
south. I admired him for travelling alone: it meant he had to survive on random support that would occasionally house him for a few days and put him on a train with a relative's address in his pocket; stay in whatever *viharas* and ashrams were open to penniless mendicants; adapt to situations that he came into without much security. It seemed much more the authentic way in which a bhikkhu should fare rather than this strange coupling with a layman. However, in terms of an unveiling of one's psychological tender spots it didn't come close to the practice Nick and I were being put through. Venerable Nimalo could set his own pace and destination; the people he stayed with were always new and glad to see him; he didn't have the continual impingement of the same person, struggling with his own difficulties, for whom one has long since ceased to be a source of interest or inspiration.

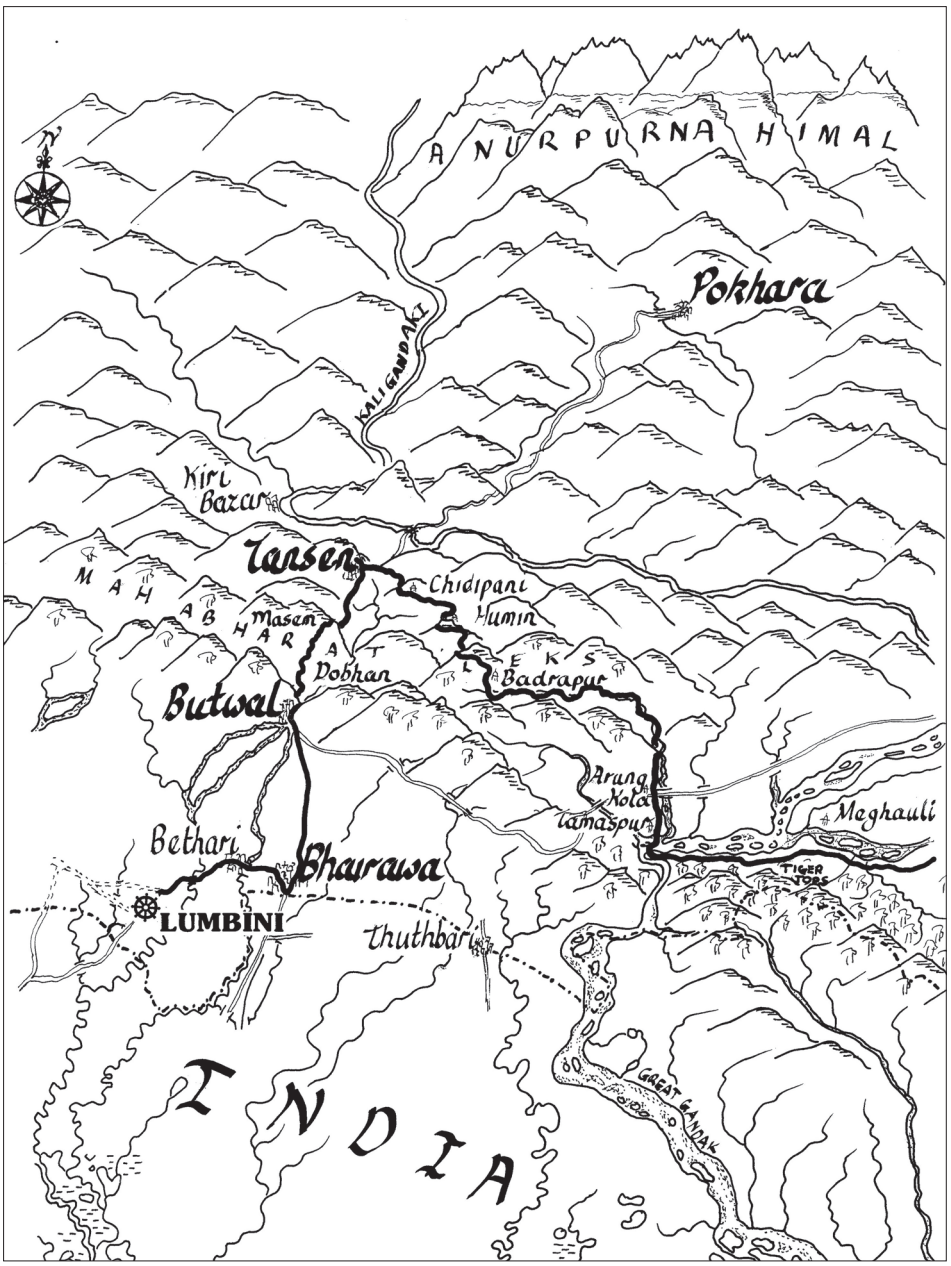
And it showed. By this time Nick and I had worn into each other like a tough foot on a tough shoe. That meant a lot of directness and a kind of relaxation. We didn't have to be anything for each other; and that was an immense advantage in being honest with oneself. The wonderful result was actually a quiet sense of mutual respect and a growing disengagement from our individual viewpoints. Not that it was smooth sailing by any means. We left Lumbini on March 17th in a last-minute scramble to get onto the roof of a bus; it was chugging off down the dirt road as we swung ourselves and our bags up the ladder on the back. That took us to the border town and onto another bus heading towards Butwal. We alighted a few kilometres before the town: it felt proper to walk, even though, as usual, it took longer than expected. Our way was to come staggering in out of the darkness with Nick looking for a place to get the sole stuck back on to his sandal and me trying to find out where the "Buddh Bihar" was from the locals and getting incomprehension in return. Back here again. Unconnectedness felt right for our pilgrimage; that was the mode of practice we kept returning to. By now I'd stopped thinking there was something wrong with it; Mother India had taught me to leave such thoughts behind.

If you go to Lumbini, have a look in the kitchen garden of the Theravada temple. There should be a couple of white-blossomed trees there; the manager promised to look after them. Just as I was scrambling on to the bus, I looked over there, saying to myself: "you'll be all right there, mum." I didn't want to leave; I felt the mood welling up again. Fortunately the bus jogged me back, as I had to get seated or fall off the roof. The wheels kicked up a cloud of choking red dust and did the leave-taking for me. Good-bye to all that; to that in me which could be called somebody's son, to whatever I hoped or worried she might feel about me. And to whomever I think I am. *Maya*! A fitting name for the Buddha's mother: what else could nurture our awakening better than this painful world of appearances, of identities, separation, and regret?

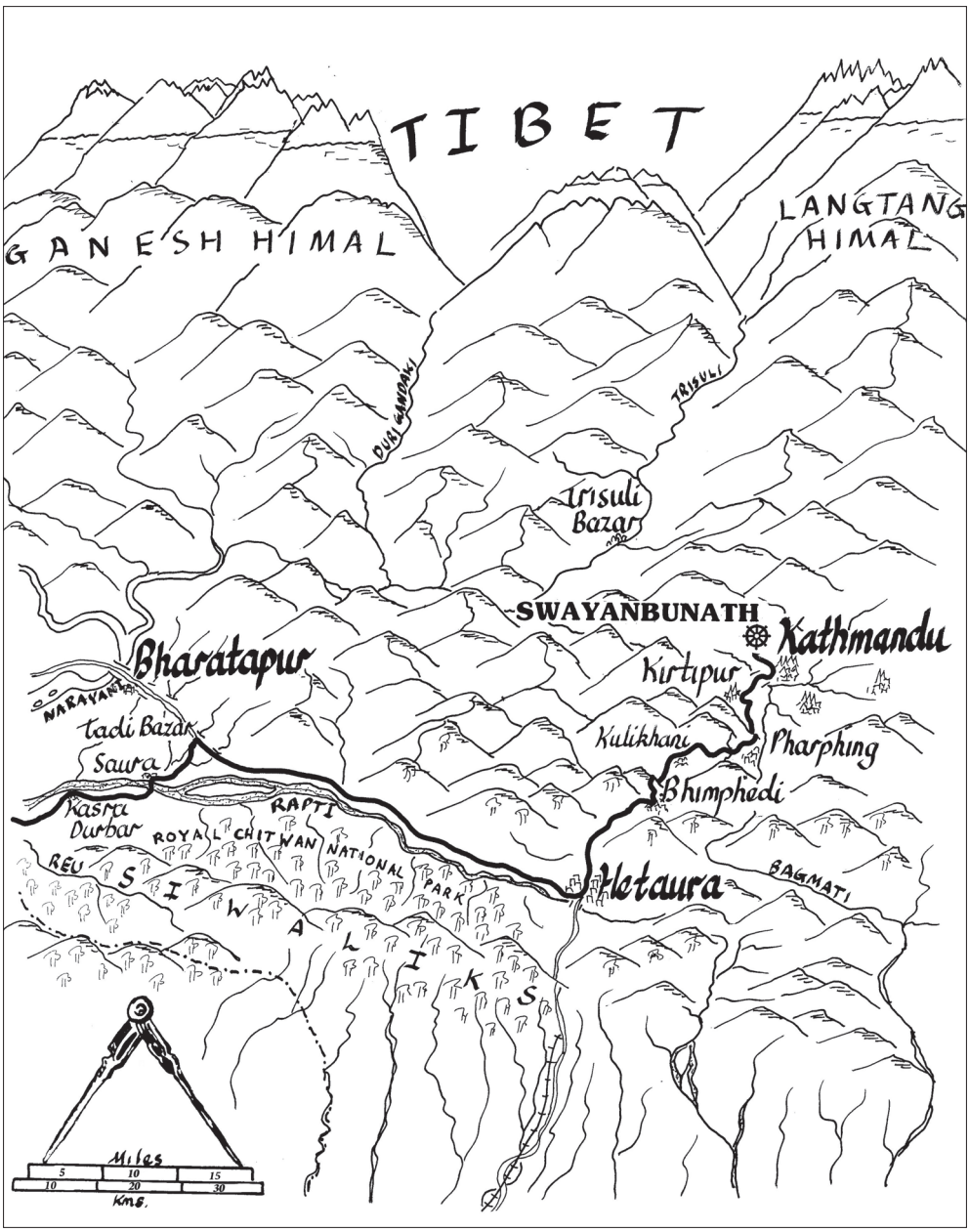
The Sixth Moon:

LUMBINI TO KATHMANDU





The Himalayan Foothills


TIBET
GANESH HIMAL
LANGTANG HIMAL
BUKI GANDAKI
TRISULI
Trisuli Bazar
SWAYANBUNATH
Kathmandu
Bharatapur
Kirtipur
NARAYANI
Tadi Bazar
Kulikhani
Pharphing
Saura
Bhimphedi
Kasra
Durbar
RAPTI
ROYAL CHITWAN NATIONAL PARK
REU
SIWALIKS
Hetaura
BAGMATI
Miles
5
10
15
10
20
30
Kms.



24

Coming up for Light

NICK

The gorge fascinated me. My attention was repeatedly drawn back to it. It was the only break in the steep wall of hills rising before us, and it seemed a door to a new land, cool and dark—an escape from the heat of the plains. From it issued the big river we walked beside, and into it disappeared our road and its trundling lorries. We were still several miles away, but even so, the road had been slightly but steadily rising as it mounted the vast delta of gravel and rocks that fanned out from the gorge onto the plain.

We had clambered down from the bus to walk into Butwal. It seemed only right to traverse those last six kilometres of the Ganges plain on foot. It was now late afternoon and Butwal was just ahead, perched on a slight rise at the base of the hill to the side of the gorge, an old town of small streets with a jumble of wood and clay houses. Once, Butwal would have been an important staging post on the route to the interior of Nepal. That was when everything was carried in and out by porters. They would have started from Butwal, but these days, the lorries bypassed it thundering into the mountains on the new road.

Directions led us to the *vihara*, an old two-storey house with outside stairs and a big wooden veranda overlooking a stone-flagged courtyard.

This proved to be the residence of three monastics, two nuns dressed all in pink and an old monk, who were surprised by our arrival but very welcoming. They produced tea, found us somewhere to stay, and insisted that we couldn't leave the next morning, as we had intended, as we would have to have *dana* there.

So we stayed two nights in Butwal. Ajahn Sucitto spent the next day resting—he still felt depleted—while I climbed the hill behind the town. I wanted to get up to the higher forested slopes that I had seen from the plain, but they were much farther up than I had imagined. After two hours of toiling back and forth on a trail that zigzagged up the steep hill face, I had to settle for the shade of the first decent-sized tree I came to and a fine view out over the plain.

My mind, though, was on the mountains ahead. The track I had been climbing was the old porterage route. Our hosts had mentioned it, saying that on the following day, once we were through the gorge, we should leave the new road and the valley and climb up to this old trail. It would be quicker that way and we would be in Tansen within two days. Mountain trails…perhaps we could abandon our original plan to head east along the base of the mountains. The porter trail went all the way to Pokhara, which was amidst real snow-covered mountains. From there perhaps we could cross the high mountain passes instead to Kathmandu.

I came down from the hillside full of such thoughts and keen to get away the next day at first light. Our hosts reluctantly agreed—providing we took something for breakfast with us. I was now so caught up in the desire to get going that even this seemed a nuisance.

I reasoned that we needed to start early to avoid climbing in the heat, so we could get to the village of Maysam in time for the meal, and so I could enjoy walking through the gorge in the half-light of dawn. But then there are always reasons.

So the next morning I got annoyed at having to wait while a Nepali matron bustled about packing a pile of warm *chappatis*, then wrapping, and carefully stitching, cooked vegetables in banana leaves for our break-

fast—she would have been up especially early to do that for us. Then I snorted inside at the cup of tea we had to have with our hosts—the kind old monk and his brother who had come by to meet us, plus the pink nuns and a young translator who had been such a help. I was fuming when we took the wrong way through town and added five minutes to our journey. By the time we got to the gorge, which I had been so looking forward to, I was in absolutely no state to enjoy it. Instead I was filled with complaints, "The sun is nearly up! It is no longer as dark in the gorge as I'd hoped! It will be hot when we start to climb! Ajahn Sucitto should have realised!"

But the gorge was as spectacular as I had hoped. Only just wide enough for the big river that tumbled through it, its vertical rock walls echoed back the roar of the water. The towering walls dwarfed our road, tucked under an overhang, and reduced the sky to a long slit way above us. It was dark and filled with a cold wind coming down out of the mountains. So I got annoyed because my annoyance stopped me enjoying it.

But on the far side was the light. It flooded into the gorge, and thankfully also into my mind, dispelling the discontent. We emerged to find the sun was up on a new vertical world of steep forested slopes with patches of cultivated terraces higher up and dotted with houses. There were even distant mountains just showing in the cleft of the valley ahead. Before us, once we had got our eyes back down to look, was the small village of Dhoban, squeezed between the river and the steep valley sides. Over a bridge and away from the main road we turned, crossing to a few flat fields on a piece of land created by a slight loop of the river. As we crossed I was still taking in the shock of the sudden beauty of this world with an extra physical dimension where I was used to just sky.

The path skirted the fields, disappeared behind a rock overhang, and then abruptly started to climb a valley so steep that the stream descended it by means of a nearly continuous waterfall. The path became a rocky staircase, climbing back and forth across the face of the narrow valley and crossing the stream at breaks in the stream's plummeting descent.

All the way up, there was deep shade from tall trees, rocks damp from the haze of falling water and bunches of green ferns. The cool walls we climbed beside were covered in dark green liverworts, wet from the misty spray, and amongst them were delicate little orchids, lovers of such cool shady places, just about to come into flower. I need not have worried about the heat of the sun!

We climbed for half an hour before stopping for the breakfast of *chappatis*, *subjee*, and boiled eggs. By then I was confident that we would reach the next village of Maysam by ten and so get food there. We could take our time. When we started again it was not long before we were coming out onto narrow cultivated ledges and climbing past the occasional house with smiling children waving as we went by.

I know now that we were climbing part of the Mahabharat Lekh, the ridge of hills that form the outer ramparts of the Himalayas. The term "Hills" seems a strange one to use for things with steep faces rising up to well over 10,000 feet, which is three times the height of the highest mountain in England; but then everything is relative, and when your country has Mount Everest at 29,000 feet, it seems reasonable to call something *himal* only if it is covered in permanent snow and ice, and call the rest *pahar* (hill) if it is not. The Mahabharat Lekh, however, is the highest and steepest of the "hill" ranges, as it is directly above what geologists call the "Main Frontal Thrust," the leading edge of the land that is being crumpled up by the sub-continent's push north.

We did get to the top of that climb by ten, but not to Maysam. Instead we came out into an empty narrow valley of dry grassland running between higher hills, at the far end of which was yet another climb, to a distant ridge and houses. It was that climb that let us know what we were really in for in the Himalayas. We were already exhausted, but we could not rest if we going to get there in time to find food to eat. There was no shade, the path had a surface of grit that our feet slipped back on, and all the way up we had to force ourselves to keep going.

We arrived at the top covered in sweat and dust to find Maysam was

just half a dozen empty houses. There was one shop, which was hardly that—just a door into a room with a few shelves of jars and a couple of sacks of grain on the floor—and there was no-one to be seen. We tried walking on but we could see no other habitation, then a young man passing confirmed that we had passed through Maysam and that there was nowhere we were likely to get cooked food. So I went back to the shop, and after a lot of calling an old lady appeared who sold me all there was to eat: four packets of cream crackers, a bag of roasted *dhal*, and some chewing sweets. Then we walked a little way along the path and tried to eat it.

When I was in my teens a friend of mine would bet people at parties that they couldn't eat a whole packet of cream crackers without taking a drink. That day I found out why. We sat under a tree by the path stoically munching, our mouths gumming up with the crackers and dry roasted *dhal*. We went through two bottles of water trying to swallow them. It was a pretty dire meal.

At least the view north was now spectacular. Beyond the breaking crests of a vast sea of ridges was a distant magical land of high mountains. We could not see their snowy peaks nestled in the clouds, but we could see that they spanned the whole horizon. Between us and them the foothills were laid out like a giant maze. Ridge after ridge lay before us like waves, with only the occasional gap in each. Nepal's rivers would once have run due south from the high mountains but have been diverted by each of these ridges as they rose up, forcing them to run east or west, then turn south to break through the ridge in a gorge. That is why, despite the long climb, it had been quicker for us to walk this way than to follow the new road beside the river.

The ridges of the middle land of Nepal are older and lower than the Mahabharat Lekh, and it is amongst them that the Nepalese civilisation developed. From where we sat we could just make out a collection of houses that must be the top end of Tansen, on the side of a ridge farther to the north. We would be there in time for the meal the next day.

The descent that afternoon was not as steep as the climb had been: the hillside was criss-crossed with narrow paddy fields all the way down. At the bottom we re-joined the road having saved ourselves some twenty kilometres of winding valley. We took it easily after that—not that we were up to doing anything else. We bathed in a stream and ambled along enjoying the gentle light at the end of the day, to stop at dusk by the river, where I lit a fire and made tea. As we drank it we agreed that despite feeling very tired, we were glad to be in the mountains.

AJAHN SUCITTO

Mountains breed madness. The walk from Butwal required such berserk surges of energy that I could only make it by letting go into a kind of raging delirium—the harsh rasping of breath bellowing in my ears like a war cry, the heat pounding through my head like blood-lust, dissolving vision into brief flashes of coherence through a blur of sweat. My mind could either bite the bullet and thrash the body on or go under. As there was nowhere to go under, I clenched and bit.

On the top of each climb, when we flopped gasping onto the ground, there would come the surge of elation, giddy, manic, overriding the body's complaints. Then the breathing would lapse back to normal and we could grunt or crack jokes at each other, and it would be up again, up the next climb, or jolting down a steep incline knowing that it meant another climb was on its way, and another energy burst, violent as a mountain storm. It was like being possessed by bouts of mania and hysteria, a possession that was yet purifying in that it left no room for doubt or grumbling. Only in the evening, when the sunset suddenly sucked the warmth out of the air, did I have the time to wonder dully how much more of this I could physically handle. I wrapped my blanket around me as we sat with a few words and tea around a fire; it was cold. Tomorrow we would go on. That's as far as I needed to think. Tomorrow would get us to Tansen; we would have a few days there to figure out what direction to take next.

Tansen, a hilltop town. We arrived mid-morning of March 20th up a muscle-searing path and wobbled into the main square. There must be a phone somewhere…I uncrinkled a scrap of paper bearing the name and phone number of Chhatra Raj, Venerable Vimalananda's younger brother…but the town was a step ahead of us. Within minutes we were spotted and escorted to a local pharmacy where the notable Buddhists of Tansen, headed by Venerable Sakyananda, Chhatra Raj Sakya, and Mr. Bajracarya were expecting us for the meal. Ah clear light! We were back in Buddha-land again: a bhikkhu to bow to, and the women folk well to the fore, dressed in their Sunday best and bearing engraved metal basins of rice, plates of curries, *dhal,* spices, sweets. It was a proper Buddhist *dana,* an offering by the congregation who were filling the room above the shop that also comprised the home of Mr. Bajracarya. We were seated on cushions and the food was offered, first to the bhikkhus who responded with chanting, and then, when we had taken what we needed, shared out amongst the twenty or so lay people. It was time for a revision on who I felt myself to be: the half-crazed tramp in my psyche shuffled aside to make room for the visiting dignitary. Here, sudden as the clearing of a storm, we were honoured guests.

After the meal, Chhatra Raj—whose name meant "royal parasol"—guided the conversation with his near-perfect English. This hilltop town had a thriving Theravada community of which the principal pillar was the town's only resident bhikkhu, Venerable Sakyananda. He was in his eighties and was the second-most senior Theravadan monk in Nepal. His influence was shared out amongst the Buddhist community, prominent members of which took turns in inviting him to their houses for his meal. Bright beyond his age (walking every day around the precipitous streets of Tansen must have been a good work-out), Bhante asked a few questions about Buddhism in Britain and fixed us with a calm but sharp eye.

This was a Theravadan enclave, distancing itself both from contemporary Tibetan Buddhism and the archaic Newari Buddhism, which is

a highly modified and unique survivor of Indian Buddhism. Chhatra Raj, however, an educated man who lectured in economics and business studies, regarded the Newari form as a collection of outdated rituals that had little to do with the Buddha's teaching. He was an experienced meditator, who when not attending to his teaching duties or his small electrical shop, or acting as Venerable Sakyananda's secretary, liked to spend time at a Goenka retreat centre in Nepalganj. Actually, there didn't seem to be much of that kind of time in his life—like so many busy people, he picked up the duty to attend to us as if it were naturally his. Inquiring after my health, he took the opportunity (the pharmacy we were in doubled as a clinic) to have Mr. Bajracarya conduct a brief examination and come up with a diagnosis and a remedy: some antibiotics and some enzymes.



Ajahn Sucitto with Venerable Sakyananda in Tansen, Nepal.

According to Mr. B. my intestines had not been functioning properly since my first major bout of dysentery: "When was that, Bhante?" "Calcutta, around the New Year." The enzymes were to restore the intestinal flora whose absence meant that I hadn't been digesting food for three months. That cast a new light on my turgid mind-states; and a long absent clarity filtered in like dawn. Where had I been? It was like this the last time I was in India—how could I have forgotten? Then the recognition: reason is the first thing to be sacrificed when the system is lacking energy.

So it was back to basics. How fitting it was that the higher realms should rest on the most modest and earthy foundations! But all things are connected. So, if you come this way, remember your guts, pilgrims: *intestinal flora*. Within a day or two those most humble of all creatures gave me the strength to think straight and at least walk around the twisting streets of the town without going wobbly. Wishing them well on their long upward climb to higher rebirths, I felt myself coming back into daylight.

Chhatra Raj settled us in the Shri Mahabodhi *Vihara*, whose construction Venerable Vimalananda was fund-raising for. It had been established in 1984, and although the main structure was more or less complete, only two small rooms and the main hall were usable. l couldn't grasp why it was needed at first, as the town already had four *viharas*, with only one monk and a nun to share amongst them. Still, it did mean that we had the place and some time to ourselves. But not a lot: our arrival had sparked off such interest that Chhatra Raj gently inquired if we would be able to give talks to the Buddhist community and suggested that many people would like to take the opportunity to invite us to their homes for *dana*-breakfast, too, if that were possible. Enriched by new internal vegetation, I felt only too happy to consent. And, feeling energy trickling back, I even felt interested in walking around to check out where we were.

We did a tour every day, both on account of going to the *dana* of the

day that Chhatra Raj had organised, and in order to see the old town with its views down the hillsides of terraced paddy fields. The terraces were so narrow, it was like looking at contours on a map. Further to the north were the high mountains, including one of the highest, Annapurna—the "goddess of bounty"—but the overcast skies prevented us from seeing them. For now it was enough to take in the human dimension: the old town inside massive wooden gates, coiling around the hilltop; the climbing streets; and the two-storey brick and plaster houses with roofs jutting out into the street from each storey. The upper stories of the houses protruded so far that they nearly met across the street below, as if people *wanted* to contact each other. Here and there arches actually spanned the narrow lanes some four or five metres above the ground level. The older houses among them had tiled roofs with gourds and squashes growing on them; you stepped down off the street to enter them, ducking your head to get under the door lintel—as we did on the many occasions when we were invited in to receive a meal or say hello. The streets were *pleasant*. Yes, you could stop and look around in a Nepali town without being harassed by man, beast, or vehicle. There wasn't the blare of muzak or the fear of stepping on something, or someone, unmentionable. Streets that did not have to channel the bedlam of India were places to converse and think about where and how we would proceed from here.

How was important. In consciousness, a pilgrimage is more like a living mandala of interconnected images than a historical record. So to re-establish the sense of pilgrimage meant picking up the thread of the past, from the parents, teachers, and the Sangha, as it had been handed on through all those Dhamma guardians from Mr. Dyas and Mr. Mishra to Maechee Ahlee, Sister Thanissara, and Thomas…through all the pestilence and mayhem of the trip so far. Now we had to sense how it would run on from Chhatra Raj through Nepal. Everything's connected.

One strand of that thread that seemed to be emerging connected us to a weave of v*iharas* and supporters across Nepal. Chhatra Raj had the

knowledge and the contacts, a list of addresses of all the Theravadan *viharas* in Nepal that we were liable to come across, along with names of relatives, sympathetic associates, and fellow Buddhists. We could be a source of inspiration to them, and they to us.

The route, speculated over on the map that I now had enough energy to investigate, was the second strand. This time, of course, we were going to be more sensible. No hurry, no particular destinations. Not so many people to avoid, so we could camp out anywhere. Brewing tea with fresh mountain water beside white torrents. Hill country, just the kind that Nick enjoyed—we would be striding along without a care in the world. My trail-hardened ear snagged that one: with this kind of enthusiasm in the air, I began to take an anxious interest in the maps and the terrain. Was this going to be another bout of being dragged through the fires of purification, this time struggling up crazy mountains? Dialogue with my fellow-pilgrim seemed to be a strand that needed strengthening.

And then there was those intestinal flora: guardians of gut-knowledge, their vital contribution was to remind me to stay connected to a certain body, above, beneath, and within all this.

NICK

I think it must have been Chhatra Raj who first explained why the surname of every Buddhist we met in Nepal seemed to be Bajracarya or Sakya. The Bajracaryas and the Sakyas were Newars, he told us, the people of the Kathmandu Valley, and they were the only two Newar castes still Buddhist. All the other Newars, those with all the other names, had converted to Hinduism some time in the past, though they too had once been Buddhist. That was as much as we got from him, that and how traditionally the two castes had all been goldsmiths: Chhatra Raj's father had been—he showed us the old tools—but the business had been changed into an electrical shop. That was what had happened to most of

them: they had become the merchant class and spread from the Kathmandu Valley throughout Nepal.

Light was dawning. So that was why there was a small Theravadan community in each of the towns, and why they all had the same name. And that was why they looked different to the locals. Tansen was an old Gurkha town. The Gurkhas, as well as being Hindu, were supposed to be of Indian stock. They still looked vaguely Indian, a montane ecotype that had evolved small bodies, big chests, and large thighs to deal with the different habitat. But Chhatra Raj with his round open face and smiling, slightly almond, eyes did not look Indian. But he didn't look Tibetan, Chinese, or Burmese either. He had something from all the peoples who have moved into the Himalaya. How he looked, what I had thought of as "Nepalese," I now realised was really Newar.

What Chhatra Raj did not tell us, but which he must have known all about, was where the names Sakya and Bajracarya came from and *why* they were the only castes that were still Buddhist. Anthropologists have shown that the Bajracaryas and Sakyas were actually once a monastic order supported by the other Newar people. They were exponents of Buddhist Vajrayana teachings and they lived in monasteries. As they practised tantric Buddhism, they had no problem with the idea of sexual relations, which eventually led to marriage and the monastic order changing to a priesthood that was inherited at birth. Later, their influence on the other castes waned, and many of them had to take up other professions associated with their role as priests: making religious statues, painting *thangkas*, and most importantly in a society that stored its wealth as jewellery, they became the gold and silver smiths.

On our third day in Tansen we ate at Chhatra Raj's house. We came in the back way, through a room behind the electrical shop, and then climbed some narrow stairs while bending forward to get our big bodies under the low ceiling. The living room was above the shop with windows looking out onto the busy main street at the front of the house. There was a shrine at the far end with a sublime Buddha *rupa* in a locked

glass case set into the wall. It was bronze with intricate inlay work in gold—an example of Newar craftwork. There were also finely made metal-work candlesticks, delicate vases with flowers, and an embellished incense holder into which Ajahn Sucitto set burning incense before bowing three times. On the walls to the side of the shrine were photos of venerable old Theravadan monks. We sat, fronting all this, on the floor, Ajahn Sucitto next to the shrine and Chhatra Raj across from us, while his wife, one of his daughters, and unmarried sister served us. His mentally handicapped son gambolled in and out of the room with the women. He seemed a happy and well-loved lad. They all gathered for the blessing given by Ajahn Sucitto, but only Chhatra Raj ate with us; the rest retired downstairs.

Afterwards we talked about how busy Chhatra Raj found his life. He was a professor at the local university as well as trying to run the shop, serve as president of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, and so much more. As he talked I could see the problem. It was all good and worthwhile stuff, but he was a do-er—like me, he got things *done*—and he hadn't apparently realised yet that if you want to have a more peaceful life you have to start leaving things undone, even if they are worthwhile.

We climbed the long hill behind the town twice. The first time just the two of us, and we did it in one go. The crest and the slopes on the far side had been planted with pine trees—a re-forestation project that had been ordered by the king when he visited Tansen some ten years earlier. He had landed there by helicopter and deplored the bare wasteland that it had become. It was now a beautiful and tranquil park, and we thought how good it would be to get Chhatra Raj up there and away from his innumerable duties. It was a small thing we could do to repay all his kindness.

Climbing with Chhatra Raj a couple of days later we chatted most of the way up, in short sentences between deep breaths. We had to rest near the top. More for Chhatra Raj, who was red in the face and had sweat

on his brow beneath his colourful Nepali hat. Then we climbed again, now using a track with a gentler gradient. The conversation turned to the less personal, to spiritual aspirations. The path followed the back of the ridge and then crossed over into the park and we stopped to look out over the succession of ridges to the clouds hiding the higher peaks. There were spaces between the sentences as we took in the scenery and eventually the conversation stopped completely. Ajahn Sucitto suggested some formal meditation. We moved across and sat down under some of the pine trees. The enveloping silence was accompanied by the whistle of the wind through the branches.

AJAHN SUCITTO

In these towering hills, life felt fresh after the lethargy of the plains. Even the weather: bright warm sunshine, then clouds followed by a crackling storm and a day of soft haze. And always fresh mountain air.

The human realm had also brightened up. The pebble-eyed stare and numbing non-sequiturs of much of our trip gave way to reasoned conversation on the history and culture of the town and the way that Buddhism was developing here. Chhatra Raj was a mine of information: although he was mostly interested in talk on Dhamma and Buddhism in Britain, we pumped him for information to get our bearings on Nepal and its religion. It was the relatively recent introduction of Theravada into the country that concerned him. Hardly surprising, considering that two of his brothers were bhikkhus: venerable Vimalananda whom we knew from Lumbini, and the highly respected Venerable Amritananda, whose recent death had robbed their *sangha* of its leading scholar and organiser. Their Theravada *sangha*, now consisting of about one hundred bhikkhus, was only just beginning its third generation, with Venerable Amritananda himself being a disciple of Maha Pragya, the man who had defied government strictures against converting to Buddhism by taking Theravada ordination in 1928. Still alive was Venera-

ble Pragyananda, the first man to walk the streets of Kathmandu in the saffron robe in recent history. Having become a *samanera* in 1930 and a bhikkhu in 1932, he was the most senior bhikkhu in Nepal and had therefore been made the titular head of the *sangha raja* a few years ago. But these were still the formative years; in fact it was only in 1946 that, thanks to the persistence of Amritananda and the support of the Sri Lankan *sangha*, bhikkhus were even allowed to stay in Nepal and teach. In other words Theravada had been in Nepal for about as long as it had in Britain and, until recently, under unfavourable circumstances at that. Its acceptance in Nepal had only come about after the Second World War, when the Nepalese state had wanted to align itself more fully with the international community. Then as the Buddha, a son of Nepal and an internationally recognised sage, came back into favour, his *sangha* crept in behind him.

So Chhatra Raj's interests moved forward into the modern world, even as mine moved back into the roots of Buddhism in this country. As with all roots, eventually it goes back to legend. Nonetheless, archaeologists had found traces of the Licchavis, whose traces we had come across at Vaishali, as apparently present in the fertile and accommodating Kathmandu Valley around the third century of the Christian era. The route they moved in on, up the Gandak, must have been the main gateway for all the subsequent developments of Buddhism to flow from Nalanda and the other academies into the valley, until the Turkic invasion slammed the gate shut at the end of the twelfth century.

After that the Newars gradually and progressively adapted, with further waves of Indian immigrants, to religious customs that were derived from Hindu culture. Over the centuries its monastic *sangha* metamorphosed into a hereditary neo-brahminical and non-celibate priesthood of two grades—the Bajracaryas (who were masters of the Vajrayana tantric practices) and the Sakyas, or *Sakyabhikshus*, who were of a lower initiation. Caste, formally instituted at the end of the fourteenth century, also helped to fix the priesthood as a caste occupation, with the two

grades becoming two clans who dwelt in *viharas* and whose lives were regulated by rites that were shadows of Buddhist ordination and Hindu initiation ceremonies. The *viharas* themselves then accrued to the association, or *guha,* of that extended family.

Vajrayana, with its extensive symbolism—and its pantheon of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities—easily absorbed images from Hinduism; and the Newari religion evolved into a Buddhist-Hindu hybrid. It reveres the great Hindu gods and tantric deities; the Buddha as an *avatar* of Vishnu; and Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva as manifestations of the primal buddha essence, the Adi-Buddha. So rituals and mantras and *pujas* have mixed together in the valley to form a Buddhism that caters to the same urge for blessing and purification as Puranic Hinduism does in India.

Things went a different way in the high mountains. Animist gods and demons negotiated by shamans would have been the norm until the end of the eighth century. The old religion known as Bon provided the refuge here as it did in Tibet, through magic and sacrifice. Buddhism came to the mountains by means of the tantric masters, principally Guru Padmasambhava. But the connection was two-way. A Nepali will point out that 150 years before Guru Padmasambhava, Buddhism had been introduced into Tibet by Bhrikuti, a princess from the valley. She was married to King Songtsen Gampo and later deified as Green Tara, the most popular goddess of Buddhist tantra.

So in the mountains the predominant form of Buddhism is Tibetan. The Tibetan diaspora since 1950 has added to the effect. Therefore we have Newari Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism and a tradition of *viharas* supported by separate associations. This was why there were four, coming on five, *viharas* in Tansen. I was delighting in all these historical threads, but Chhatra Raj had little to say on the matter. He was for moving forwards, whereas I was eager to get a sense for the various elements in the Nepalese tradition.

In terms of our pilgrimage "forwards", or the exact route, was a

matter of some debate. Obviously we were going to Kathmandu—the valley has always been the heart of the kingdom, the site of Swayambhunath, the hilltop shrine to the Adi-Buddha; and most of the Theravadan *viharas* were in various towns in the valley. However, there was a good deal of debate and haggling. The locals thought that going via the road would be more suitable…a walk through the high mountains would be difficult. Nick didn't want roads and was attracted to a mountain walk. I'd dig my heels in at the prospect of another difficult slog, and we both complained about having to follow and always accommodate the other's wishes. Occasionally Chhatra Raj, visiting with a friend or two, would add some non-aligned viewpoints to the debate. Eventually it was the heavy bait of Chitwan National Park that eventually weighed in favour of the less mountainous southern route, through the foothills south-east of Tansen, into the park and eastwards before swinging north to the Kathmandu Valley. It would probably take us ten days, leaving us time to dawdle in the Kathmandu Valley and then visit some pleasant mountain scenery as a kind of holiday with which to round off our trip. By the fifth day, that was decided.

Our last day in Tansen, March 24th, was the grand finale: an alms round through the town culminating in the Mahacetiya *vihara*, where we would have a farewell *dana* and then head out over the hills. It was stupendous. I had borrowed a larger bowl for the occasion as I expected there would be more food given than I could fit in my own bowl; but really it made little difference. The bowl was full within minutes with uncooked rice, dry food, and bags and packets of biscuits; I had to empty it into a shopping basket that an accompanying lad was carrying. It seemed like most of the population of the town was lining the main street up to the *vihara*. By the time I had staggered for refuge to the images of the five *dhyani* Buddhas in the *vihara*'s forecourt, five lads were struggling behind me with overloaded shopping baskets. Chhatra Raj explained that there were few villages on the way and people had wanted to make sure we had enough food for the journey. The con-

gregation who joined us at the *vihara* were a little surprised that we wouldn't be carrying the food with us, or the dinky little oiled-cloth umbrella that the resident nun presented me with; we left them all at the *vihara* after the meal and my farewell Dhamma talk. You can only travel light in the mountains.

Not that these were even the high mountains yet. Tansen was only about 1,300 metres up. The valleys were plunging below us, but the real peaks were still hidden in the overcast sky when we set out. Chhatra Raj and three men accompanied us out of the town, still suggesting that we go by the road, until we bid them farewell and followed the ridge trail going south-east to Chidipani and Arung Kola.

It was after an hour's walking that the peaks made their appearance, at first hazily through a shower of rain, floating high in the sky, seemingly unconnected to the planet. Like gods, beyond the human dimension. We scurried on as the drops grew heavier, then as the sky began flinging cloudfuls of hail that ricocheted around our feet, we ducked into a shelter that loomed up in the gloom. It was a simple farm house—surely the owner wouldn't mind. He was in a corner and seemed hardly surprised to see us. I tried some Hindi and some Nepali phrases that Chhatra Raj had given me, then noticed his wide-staring eyes. Whatever words were tumbling out of his lips were not in a language that I could understand. He was obviously mentally abnormal. Here such a person was still looked after as one of the family, maybe even considered to be a holy fool. And if he could have explained, what would his absent relatives have made of his tale of two giants who came with the hail but some message from above? But he wasn't that interested in us; his unfocused stare reached out of the simple aperture that served as a window and into the sky. And then almost in response, the Himalayas appeared in splendour; dazzling bright as the sky cleared, parading impossibly high above the earth. To look up at them from the ridge top bent the neck back as far as the plummeting valleys bent it down. In between the two levels, we hung, somehow connected to all of it in a way that would



Setting out from Tansen.

snap the mind if you dwelt on it too long. The human level felt so fragile that we should surely ask gods to protect our bodies—and minds—from being snuffed out by it all.

NICK

After four months of walking across a flat plain, it is understandable that it took us a while to take full account of the vertical dimension when planning our route in Nepal. Despite our new map being covered with contorted brown lines which made it look like the artwork on a bank note, and people in Tansen feeling it would be difficult to walk direct from there to Chitwan, I reckoned we could do it, and that it would take three days at most.

At first the track followed one of the east-west ridges and was made for jeeps—although we only passed one. It was easy going, first on one side of the ridge with views north to the mountains, now again covered in clouds, and then, after we had dropped to a cleft in the ridge where the lorries toiled up and over on the main road to Pokhara, we made our way along the other side, looking south and down to the small flat

sea of green paddy in the valley bottom. The track weaved in and out following the contour. Most of the ridge's side was bare stony scrubland with the occasional small patch of paddy terraces in one of the slight notched valleys.

We spent the night in a school house in Chidipani, a small hamlet set in the cleft where our track climbed up and over the ridge again. We got permission from the caretaker to lay our sleeping mats between the rows of desks. It seemed a good idea after the storm. From there we headed south on a secondary ridge that led to Hami.

After Hami we found out why most people were on foot and why all the goods were being carried by porters in long woven baskets hung across their foreheads. The track changed to a path that suddenly plummeted down the side of the steep valley and, once it had reached the distant bottom, climbed the opposite side. We spent most of the day toiling down, and then up, to find ourselves little more than an arrow's flight from where we started. Then we went round the side of the hill to find we had to do it again! We gave up at the bottom of the next valley and stayed there, spending the night on the only two square metres of flat land we could find.

We were coming back into the Mahabharat Lekh where the ridges are higher and where the rivers, so close to escaping onto the plain, have cut lower. That is why this is one of the last parts of Nepal to have been cleared for cultivation—it is all near-vertical slopes—and why the village of Badrapur, which we climbed up to on the third day, was the last settlement shown on my map.

As we left the village, already starting to go down again, we were called over by a man to a large house with red earth between the wooden uprights and cross pieces. We joined him on his veranda looking out over the valley, well below us. Maize cobs hung from the rafters to dry, there were hollowed logs filled with seeds, wooden seats, and a floor of big planks with gaps and a sight of the earth beneath. It all had a feeling of plenty, in a simple rustic way. A water buffalo munched in a

thatched byre beneath us, a kitchen garden bloomed with young vegetables, chickens pecked for grubs, and farther below spread terraced paddy fields.

Our host had grey hair, a simple sarong and shirt, and a calm centred air about him. He had no English, but some youths came by who had learnt enough at school to ask the usual questions about where we were going and then, when that was over, to translate some that we had for him. In reply to something I asked he told us how poor he was and how poor Nepal was. "I have no money to buy anything with. All I have is a radio and a watch." He showed us the watch on his wrist and the radio in pride of place on its own shelf on the wall of the veranda. I tried pointing to the house, the land, the chickens, and the water buffalo. "Ah, we used to think we had everything. But now we know we are poor." I did try telling him that they had things of much greater value, but when you haven't got the car, the television, and the iPod, and only have the fantasy, it is hard to see that.

Later, after we had been offered an excellent and wholesome meal ("rice, *dahl*, several vegetable dishes, one with mustard, *ghee*, and whey"—it is not often that the little red diary lists the dishes) brought to us by his wife ("eight simple rings in rim of ears, more ornate ones in lobe"), we asked the way. The youths said the route was difficult, that it was on small paths and involved a lot of climbing. "But can we not follow the river?" Both Tamaspur, the place where we were heading, and Arung Kola, the place near to it that we had been told to ask for, were on the river Arung, and according to my maps the Arung was just below us. They said we could but it would be "better" to follow the path.

We did try, but the path seemed to be heading away from where we wanted to go, and I could see the river down below and even some fields beside it. We were fed up with the paths and all the climbing they involved. Surely following the river would be less work. So we gave in and scrambled down the slope, following the faintest of trails, picking our way down rocky outcrops and hanging on to trees as we passed.

It was much farther than I had imagined, and it took a fair part of the afternoon to get down. And, of course, when we got to the bottom there was no path, just a few paddy fields on a small flat piece of land beside the river.

We sat down to recover and to take stock. The river that thundered by us seemed to comprise as much of rounded boulders and rocks as of churning white water. The rocks were all manner of hues glistening in the sun from the white spray: orange, grey, crimson, and cream sedimentary rocks; blue-grey and light-grey conglomerates with bands, speckles, or spots; all rolled there by the river from their respective geological outcrops farther into the mountains. The valley sides were steep, and where our patch of land ended there was a near sheer wall of scree and rubble running straight into the river. To follow the river we would have to cross it.

I cut poles from the scrub beside us, and we wobbled across through the raging water, me first to see if it were possible and then Ajahn Sucitto. When we got across we found that the patch of land on the other side was no larger than the first, and a few hundred yards farther on we had to cross slowly back again. We must have crossed four or five times, our feet becoming numb from the cold water, before we stopped, exhausted, to sleep the night on one of the small flat areas of paddy. By then we had realised why the locals climbed over the last line of hills rather than follow the river.

Next day, after a breakfast of tea and Chinese packet noodles, it was the same. We had to cross that river another twenty-three times—I counted!—taking our sandals off each time, leaning on the poles, our numb feet feeling for footholds amongst the rushing white water and the glossy wet boulders. Occasionally we passed across a bigger piece of flat land with a thatched shelter on it, but all the farm houses were higher up, amidst patches of terraces within the woodland on the steep hillsides. We saw very few people and found no proper paths.

The small riverside fields were mostly freshly flooded with young

seedlings of wheat so we walked along their earth walls. At 9:00 A.M. we met a farmer who said we would be at Arung Kola in four hours—which cheered us up—but when we stopped for our meal at midday, slowly chewing our way through dried rice flakes, salted nuts, and dried beans, we could see we still had much, much, more than that to go.

It got hot too. We must by then have been down at the height of the plain, and the increased heat sapped our energy. Although the river crossings were cooling, the glare from the sun reflected in every direction by the water's shattered surface made me squint whichever way I looked, and by the afternoon I had a throbbing headache.

It was five when we finally reached the gorge. The river suddenly turned south to break through the high ridge of hills we had been walking beneath, and the gorge was full of giant lumps of limestone that had crashed down from the cliffs above. It was dark and cool, but the real relief was finding a proper path skirting the giant boulders and that we need not cross the river again.

On the far side we camped on the flat delta of shingle where the river fanned out. We sipped our tea by a fire under a filling moon and then lay down to sleep. Neither of us stayed up to meditate—we were utterly exhausted. Getting out of the mountains had taken five days, not three. It would have been much quicker walking the "long way," all the way by road, and a day shorter if we had kept to the track and not followed the river. It felt a relief to be out of the mountains and back on the plain.



25

Once Upon a Time

AJAHN SUCITTO

March 28th. Up before dawn and struggling on after a hard night on the sand. Familiar stuff: the stiffness and cold work out of the bones within an hour; then the mind stumbles out of grogginess with spasms of lust for food and tea, querulous speculation over how far it would be before the Promised Land, and sketchy diatribes against the incompetence/insensitivity of the leader: the politics of a pilgrimage. It's just the painful defences that the mind makes against pain, just the blisters again. Sometimes you have to wrap your heart around your mind and hold it close.

And there was Nick up front with the sun hat he'd bought in Tansen. It was one you could turn inside out: one side white with "Love" printed across its front, the other side a kind of grey-green sporting the word "Power." I'd look up and notice how they changed with the hours. Easy slogans, difficult realisations.

But listen, if you're coming this way, follow the advice of the locals; these mountain people know their trails. Unlike the people of the Ganges plain, Nepalis must have done a lot of travelling on foot (no other way until recently), and they have a long tradition of porters. When they say a trail is difficult or long, believe them. In fact add to it. Treble it. Yes-

terday morning a farmer had told us that Arung Kola was four hours' walk away. Eight hours later we were stumbling into a chai shop on a trail just before it entered the gorge, with Arung Kola nowhere in sight. Then we came across a band of porters bearing enormous baskets that extended from their heads to below their knees, the whole thing supported by a band around their heads. Some were barefoot, some just had simple rubber thongs on their feet, but they were hauling construction material—tiles and lengths of piping—up from Arung Kola to some remote settlement. One look at them told me that we were in a different league here. As for us, worn out beyond feeling, we eventually spent the night by the river just beyond the thundering gorge. After that I was for checking the route out in more detail. Those intestinal flora had granted me the wits to do that.

So that, after emerging from the gorge and arriving, three hours later, at Arung Kola; and after slumping into a bar with refrigeration and—halleluja!—chilled mango juice; and after contemplating the wall with trial-numb blankness and downing one, then another, of those blessed "Fruitees"; I got to checking things out with the locals. It was a hunch that got me talking to one of the lads; he had a Buddha medallion on a thin chain around his neck, but it was a good move. After some preliminaries I showed him the paper with the name of our expected host in Tamaspur, S. B. Malla. "He's here," said the lad in Nepali, "His house is here." So that saved us a frustrating walk to Tamaspur.

Actually, *one* of S. B. Malla's houses was in Arung Kola. It was an engineering shop with a couple of rooms above it; it was his work place. His real home, inherited from his family, was a farm house in the old village of Tamaspur. But there was no money in farming cereals.

We had the meal in a room above the shop, served by Mr. Malla and his wife. They looked like they were in their thirties—maybe. She still had the lithe figure and unadorned beauty of a young woman, difficult to believe she had given birth to three children. He looked a little older, bespectacled and relaxed in denim shorts and a tee shirt. After

the meal, he took the rest of the day off and wandered with us through the sal groves down to Tamaspur, talking most of the way. He was well informed and an easy speaker, an old school-friend of Chhatra Raj. We talked about farming and sal forests, about a possible route through Chitwan Park, and about religion and meditation. His chief concern, however, was politics. He had been active in local politics for seventeen years (being actually forty-four years old) and had just failed to be nominated as the representative of the Nepali Congress Party for the area in the forthcoming elections. The election was due in June and would only be the second one in Nepal to use a system of political parties.

The country had been teetering between democracy and despotic rule for more than a century. Firstly the monarchy had been sidelined by a dictatorship of hereditary "prime ministers" of the Rana family between 1846 and 1951. Then there was a rebellion that restored the monarchy as head of state but with a parliament of sorts. However King Mahendra abolished that in 1960, replacing it with a party-less system of *panchayats,* or local, district, and national councils (of which S. B. Malla had been a member). In 1990, things had shifted again, through another rebellion, to a set-up of a constitutional monarchy with political parties. Hence slogans and posters were much in evidence. As a lot of people couldn't read, the parties had adopted logos, which were emblazoned in red paint on whatever wall would support them: a sun for the Communists, a cow for Congress, a tree for somebody else….

However, for all of S. B.'s concern for the welfare of the people, politics all seemed remote to me as we sat around in the late afternoon sun. It was difficult to see much to organise in the blue sky and the lazy gentle day. Easy to forget the harsh poverty, illiteracy, and high mortality rate of the mountains—and the alarming rise in population and destruction of the environment. Even S. B.'s politics was of a ruminative rather than fiery sort, delivered reflectively as he fingered the belly button just paunching out between his shirt and his shorts. He didn't seem to have cultivated enough righteous indignation to make it in politics.

But he was a key figure in the district. His family had moved into this area shortly after it was made habitable in the 1950s. They must have had some influence and wealth to acquire such a large tract of farmland—perhaps they were remotely descended from the Malla ("Wrestler") kings of Nepal's medieval golden age. There was the feeling of the benevolent country squire about him: the gentle hospitality and courtesies, with his wife quietly arranging a suitable place in a garden pavilion for us to stay. In the evening, local people came to seek his advice and hang out around what was the biggest house of the village. And he took it all in as part of his social duty, with the political sensitivity of a bygone age.

NICK

The little red dairy has: "29th morning. Nick to bazaar on S. B.'s Chinese Phoenix bicycle." I remember that. It was a very solid old-fashioned sit-up-and-beg bicycle with big soft tyres and a sprung seat so that the occasional tree root on the path was a slight sigh as I rode over it. Most of the path was sandy and smooth, and I sailed through the sal forest, patches of dried leaves crackling under the wheels. The trees were so regularly spaced and even-aged, and with nothing growing in the gloomy light under them, that it was more like a fairy-story forest than the real thing.

I am hazy about why I went to the bazaar and what I bought there. I must have been seeking supplies for our forthcoming journey through Royal Chitwan National Park. The park is the most famous wildlife reserve in Nepal, if not on the Indian sub-continent, home to tiger and leopard and one of only two places in the world containing the mythic Indian one-horned rhino. It is also one of the few places one can still see the kind of habitats that would once have covered the entire Ganges plain: the tall grasslands, the forests, and the wildlife the Buddha would have known.

That is why we had come to Tamaspur, to cross into Chitwan, and

Chhatra Raj had suggested that his friend S. B. Malla would be able to help us do it. S. B. had said he would arrange for us to get across the river that lay between us and the park. According to my old map, there was a road on the far side that led east through the park. S. B. was not so sure—he had never been across the river himself, but villagers had told him the road was little used.

When I got back we had a meal on the lawn of the house. I remember that because I was dismayed at all the arrangements that had been made while I was away. All I had wanted was a boat across the river, but after the meal a large cooking pot was brought out and then a small sack of rice. I protested that I now had all the supplies, but I was told not to worry, these things were for our guides, two village lads who were coming with us to show us the way. The last thing I wanted was guides—having had too many bad experiences of travelling with inexperienced guides. However, I reckoned that Ajahn Sucitto would cite my last refusal to listen to local advice…. and anyway we were guests and S. B. was unhappy letting us go alone. These two lads wanted to visit Bharatpur, he explained, and they could get there by walking through the park, so it was no problem. We were introduced and I had to accept them. The last part of the expedition to arrive was an enormous marrow, which was given to the guides by the Malla mother who lived in the Tamaspur house and who had presided over the meal.

Then we all walked down to the river and our host negotiated with some of the tribal people that live by fishing to ferry us across. After some haggling in Nepali, I produced the money and then we got into the boat, which sank to a few inches from the gunwales. The fisherman pushed us off with one bare foot in the water while kneeling in the back, then he picked up his long pole to punt us across. We went with the fast flow of the river as we crossed, and now I can recall the scene well. In the same way that Ajahn Sucitto can describe the detail inside a temple we only glanced at, I can still remember all the wildlife and what it was doing. Tales are filtered by our own interests.

Across the river a small flight of brahminy ducks took off, their wings breaking the water into fine droplets, calling in alarm as they went. Beyond them was a bank of tall grass, and beyond that was primary, untouched rain forest. The forest was vast, it rose before us, covering low undulating hills until reaching the light blue sky. We must have gone half a mile down the big river in getting across, with me scanning the water for river dolphins and gharial, a strange narrow-snouted species of crocodiles, both of which I knew still occurred there. It was the opposite direction to the way we wanted to go, but I didn't care; it would just be more of this fabulous-looking forest to walk through.

We landed on a sandy inlet where a stream came down to the river, and we scrambled out, passing our luggage ahead of us. The fisherman then pushed off and, letting the fast current take his craft, quickly disappeared downstream leaving us alone. Only then did we realise quite what we had let ourselves in for. The grass towered above us, at least ten foot high, and the forest jungle was impenetrable, it was so filled with dense understorey. I did try to push my way inland along the stream, but even that was impossible. There was no choice but to walk beside the river, which was abutted by a small cliff with the jungle nearly hanging over it. Someone in the village had said that it was two to four hours to a jeep road, presumably the one shown on my map. But how did we get to it? We were also realising that our "guides" had no English, understood little Hindi, and were apparently as uncertain of what they were doing as us. As we set off they did take the lead, but they were a comic sight. They carried the big cooking pot, stuffed with a sack of rice, between them in a woven plastic shopping bag as they struggled along, and took turns carrying the marrow under one arm. Besides that they only had small shoulder bags. I hoped they had something in the bags for the night.

The big river we were struggling beside is known in the mountains of Nepal as the Kali Gandaki, but in Chitwan they call it the Narayani. In India it becomes the Gandak we had crossed in a ferry when we first entered Bihar. There it was slow-moving and brown from all the silt.

Here it flowed more swiftly, and while it was just as opaque, the colour was a swirling milky blue. Its course ran at the base of the low range of hills called the Siwaliks, which in comparatively recent times has begun to rise out of the plains. In several places this range has caught and bent the big mountain rivers like the Gandak, creating enclosed valleys that end where the river turns back south through a gorge. These valleys are wide and flat and are effectively part of the *terai,* cut off by the rising hills. Chitwan is the largest. It is triangular in shape, with a base eighty miles from east to west, and a greatest width—from the Siwaliks to the Mahabharat Lekhs—of twenty miles.

Because the river was fast flowing, much of the material it was depositing was coarser than that left out on the plain. Where we crossed it the river ran in a deeper channel, hard against the hills, but as we moved east it spread out and bars of shingle started to appear. Further on we could see islands in the river, some of them very large and covered in trees, and large tracts of gravel turning to grassland.

Amidst that vast natural scene we were a strange sight. The two at the front with their ludicrous shopping bag, followed by a gaunt scarecrow of a monk, robes flapping off him and an old tattered bag on his shoulder, and at the back, the mad professor who got them into all this, agog at everything he saw, pulling binoculars up to his eyes every time something appeared, and suddenly bending to flick manically through a small book. I was so engrossed in it all that I twice fell flat on my face, once nearly tumbling into the river.

It was all so wonderful though. Here were habitats as described in my textbooks. This was how nature had once worked, when it had been left on its own. The newly-exposed gravel covered in flowers and small grasses, older gravel areas a sea of giant grasses up to twenty feet in height, and the grassland in turn invaded by groves of young acacia trees on its way to become riverine forest. There was the whole natural process whereby nature converts newly deposited river gravel to mature forest. But it was all going backwards in time too. There were places where

the river was cutting back into it all again, gravel beds that were eroding, and islands with cliffs and toppling trees, which would fall and be washed away with the next rainy season. This natural succession was cyclical, so that although each of the habitats was transitional, each was always going to be here somewhere.

Towards the end of the day there was a deep cackling call from above us, and I whirled round to get a sight of two great pied hornbills sailing majestically across the canopy, gigantic black and white birds with bright yellow double bills as big as their bodies. Their wing beats produced a deep drone that continued after the brief sight of them had ended, echoing above us as they sailed away across the forest, in search of trees in fruit. They are the largest of the hornbills and now very rare. They need large areas of untouched mature forest to breed, and there is little of that left. For the mad scientist just that one sighting made all the stumbling along the river bank worthwhile. I did shout out to the gaunt monk, up ahead, but he looked the wrong way and missed them.

Shortly after that we stopped. Despite having travelled for more than four hours, there was still no sign of the road, and it would soon be dark. As the guides collected wood to start a fire, the two of us sat on the grassy bank looking north. The hard work was over for the day; we could sit there and take in the beauty of our surroundings. The setting sun had turned the distant cloud-draped mountains salmon pink, there was an Indian river tern making one last attempt to fish the wide river in front of us—flapping along with its head down, beak pointing intently at the water—and from behind us came the noise of the jungle: churring crickets, droning insects, birdcalls, and the distant barking of a deer. In that mellow state that comes with evening I began to think that having the guides along was not such a bad thing. They could make the tea while we sat there and enjoyed the wilderness.

THAWK…THAWK…THAWK…. CCCRRAASH! Behind us the guides had felled a small tree, and they were now chopping furiously at the wood. They had already got an adequate fire of branches burning,

but they were not content with that. THAWK…THAWK…THAWK…. CRASH! Another small tree came down. And it was all going straight onto the fire! Eventually they had a bonfire, with their pot perched between two small tree trunks on the top. It was giving out so much heat we had to shift down the bank.

At least the pot was soon boiling, and I took our tea and sugar over to make tea. They had no mugs, so I gave them mine to share and returned to the view. But tea didn't stop the activity, as I had hoped. They put the pot back on the fire to cook the rice while one of them started cutting more timber with the machete. So we retreated to a grass knoll a good hundred yards from all the commotion. But it was still difficult to enjoy a night in the wild when there was a raging inferno near by, with two lads chopping, one at trees, the other at a marrow.

We did our best: we set up our small shrine, did some chanting, and then sat in meditation…but only for ten minutes.

"Sahib, sahib!"

We opened our eyes. The guides had come over to ask us to return. The big fire they explained was to scare off tigers! They wanted us near it, I suspect, not to protect us but to protect them. Later, having failed several times to move us, they left the fire to sleep on our grass knoll. And, of course, they had brought nothing for sleeping either. Ajahn Sucitto had to loan them his blanket, which they huddled under together.

By the next morning we had seen enough of the "guides" to realise that we had to decide on the route. They obviously had no idea where they were going. After breakfast—our supplies shared with them as they were down to a cooking pot, some rice, and a shopping bag—I started by taking us away from the river, walking into the forest along a stream bed with the guides hacking at low branches to get us through. After twenty minutes we found the partially overgrown track and a small collapsed bridge that had once crossed the stream. The track was unused, but it was still possible to follow it in the direction we wanted to go, and the walking was easier. The old track gave us level ground, and despite

having to clamber round a few fallen trees, we began to make better progress. We could also relax, let the "guides" walk ahead again, and take in the forest.

We were now in real jungle! It was dominated by sal, with the occasional teak plus a few other tree species, but it was very different from the planted forest I had cycled through. There was so much undergrowth: plants with large mottled leaves like house plants at home; cycads and ferns; lots of seedling trees; and a mass of tangled vines climbing up into the canopy. Although we could see into it for no more than a few yards, there was a lot of noise coming out of it: the strange hoots, whistles, and screeches of unknown birds and animals lurking in its depths, and the continuous drone of insects from the canopy above .

Suddenly up ahead, one of the guides stopped. They started jabbering to each other, and when we arrived they pointed at the ground. There were pugmarks on the track ahead, going in the same direction as us. Tiger! One of them indicated that he could smell tiger, and he was right, too—there was the rancid smell of cat. And there, to one side, was a freshly clawed trunk of a young tree—a tiger had been this way very recently, marking its territory. I was excited. But the guides were even more so. They wanted to turn back! They were so petrified that one of them was visibly shaking!

We tried with Ajahn Sucitto's Hindi to persuade them to go on, but they would have none of it. Neither of them had ever seen a tiger—all they had were village stories—and they were frightened out of their wits. But we could not go back. Now that we had at last found the only route through the jungle we had to follow it. So Ajahn Sucitto suggested we went on while they went back, but that frightened them just as much. Eventually we compromised—we all went on, but we had to walk in front while the "guides" trailed a hundred yards behind us.

The pugmarks ran ahead of us, and they certainly seemed fresh—when we came to a stream we could see how they covered other footprints. Now I had got the scent I could smell it all the time. It was still

early enough in the morning for a tiger to be hunting. The vegetation was so dense that we could easily come upon it by surprise. Just the situation when a tiger might attack to defend itself. I kept repeating to myself how to behave if one sees a tiger—stop dead and let the tiger do the moving; if you move forward it may feel threatened and if you retreat it thinks you are prey! And, I have to admit, I let Ajahn Sucitto go in front—he didn't seem to be scared. He never has been one for worrying about danger.

After an unbearably long twenty minutes we came to a stream where the pugmarks turned off, showing the tiger had headed down to the river. We could relax. The guides were jubilant and now sauntered along at the front, full of themselves. They were chatting again, too—they had been utterly silent behind us.

It was an hour later when I thought I heard distant voices. I couldn't believe it at first. But sure enough we then saw some kind of camp through the forest, down near the river. Thinking that they could give us directions we made our way towards it. There were thatched buildings and a few locals working. One of whom scurried off and then—

"Hi. Do you guys want a Coke?"

She was blonde and in her late teens. Rosy red cheeks, college sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers , and as American as blueberry pie. She looked like she should be doing cheers for the college football team.

"Are you guys lost?"

We weren't lost, we were stunned! Eventually we managed to mumble something affirmative and then follow her, still mesmerised as she added: "Gee, you look all in. Why don't you come to the bar."

We were guided between some neatly thatched roofs with tents under them to a large circular stone building also topped with thatch. It was all so new and so well made that it felt totally out of place, like we were walking into a film set—or out of one. The paths were neatly swept, and there were little signs everywhere with lanterns to light them at night. The large building was constructed elegantly and with sophis-

tication using local materials—wood seating and tables, cobbled floor, low stone walls—to create a large meeting area with a bar and a central log fire.

We were at "Temple Tiger," our hostess explained, a camp for upmarket tourists. Her name was Catherine, she had family who knew the owner, and she was over from the States for a vacation working at the camp. She gave us cold Pepsi, then real coffee, with a jug of cream, and fresh bread rolls with jam and butter…we were directed to showers, in a hut, which had hot water, fragrant soap, shampoo, and large fluffy towels…but the unusual twist, the bit that left the mind wondering, was when Catherine said:

"Gee, it's amazing to meet a Buddhist monk here. Theravada Buddhism was one of my majors at college, and I was hoping I'd meet a real monk."

O.K. What's the chances on that one? Sometimes things happen with an element of the miraculous like that and seem a confirmation of what you are doing. Of course, they can be dismissed as coincidences, but even then, they still have something else about them that leaves you wondering, with the hairs on the back of your head tingling.

It was Catherine who sorted out the "guides" for us. By now they were looking embarrassed and very out of place. She arranged a lift for them to Meghauli, the nearest village outside the park. Over more coffee we told her our story and where we were going. She offered to put us up that night but we reluctantly declined—that night was the full moon, and we intended to spend it in the wild, somewhere we might see tiger. So instead she arranged for me to talk to one of their young Nepali rangers named Dil, who suggested, with a James Cagney drawl, a place just an hour farther on. She also gave us the name of an English friend working at a similar establishment called Tiger Tops where we could stop for breakfast the following morning. The only thing not utterly perfect in the whole incident was the meal. Catherine only asked if we wished to eat half an hour before midday, so we had to make do with

what she could find, supplemented with things I was carrying. I knew if I had mentioned it earlier she would have produced a proper feast, but somehow it felt wrong to ask for anything. You have to be careful when you are around miracles.

We left in the late afternoon, Ajahn Sucitto blessed the workers' shrine, and Catherine thanked us with embarrassing sincerity for visiting.

The track was now well used and easy to follow. It ran along the edge of the jungle, and we could look out over a small river to a vast swath of tall grassland. This was the core of Royal Chitwan Park. It's almost all grassland with just the occasional island of trees and the odd cut-off river ox-bow making a watering place.

This is what I was really looking forward to seeing. Such grassland is now so rare and it is the most productive of ecosystems, especially for large animals. The two evolved for each other. Grass can keep producing its long narrow leaves no matter how much they are eaten by large animals, and their grazing keeps trees from establishing that would shade the grass out. Because the two have evolved together, they need each other. Without the big animals, the grassland turns to woodland, and without the grassland, the big animals have nothing to feed on and soon disappear. And that is the problem for conservation. Riverine grassland, such as this, is also very productive when it is ploughed up for crops. It is always the first habitat to disappear.

The land beside the big rivers of the Ganges plain was once all such swampy grassland. The Korean monk Hye Ch'o who came on pilgrimage to the holy places in 727 C.E. wrote an account of which most has been lost, but amongst the few scraps that remain is a telling reference to the River Gandak near Kushinagar. He describes how many pilgrims lost their lives there to rhino and tiger. So even then, halfway between the Buddha's time and our own, this kind of habitat must have extended all the way down the Gandak. By the time the British came, it only remained in a few pockets where rulers had kept *shikas*, hunting areas, and in one broad band right across the base of the Himalayas—the *terai*

was always the most difficult land to cultivate. Much of it was swamp, the other parts were heaped alluvial mounds with a water table too far down, and the area had rampant malaria. The last of the *terai* to remain completely untouched was the area within Nepal. This was due to Nepalese government policy.

The Ranas, the hereditary prime ministers, kept the swampy, malaria-ridden *terai* as a barrier between them and the British. It was also somewhere to hunt, and they managed it to provide the grandest hunting parties in the world. Leaving different areas untouched for years—with penalties of death for anyone caught poaching—they invited rulers and other dignitaries to come and shoot. Chitwan was the best, equivalent to Africa's Serengeti. There was so much wildlife here that in one shoot in 1938 they took one hundred twenty tigers, twenty-eight rhinos, and twenty-seven leopards.

So what went wrong? People of course, too many to be able to leave the *terai* un-touched. The Ranas fell in 1951. There was great unrest in the country, the main reason being the need for land. The new government had to provide land to appease the people and it turned to the *terai* to provide it. Displaced hill people were resettled, and with the help of the United States, the malaria was eradicated. Within twenty years the Nepalese *terai* was transformed into the country's granary, producing 70 percent of the food grains. In that transformation much of Chitwan's grassland and forest disappeared under the plough, and the wildlife in the rest was hunted and poached by the new settlers. By the 1960s barasingha, the wild water buffalo, and wild elephant had become extinct, and the rhino was about to go the same way. In 1963 Chitwan National Park was proposed to save what remained.

We did not get to the place that Dil had recommended until it was dark. It had been a humid afternoon, sapping our strength, and we were pleased to stop. Still, he was right—the place was ideal. A stream came out of the hills and created a steep-sided valley, which Dil had called a *nullah*. This one was dry and formed an amphitheatre where it spilled

out over a bank and into a small river that flowed at its base. Beyond the river was the sea of grassland. The grassland had been burnt in recent months so that much of it was only a few feet high, but there were still pockets of unburnt grass, which could provide stalking sites for tigers. The tigers would be after the deer that Dil had said would venture out at night to graze on the new green shoots of the regrowing grass. So we could sit there, our backs against a large boulder, steep banks on either side leading up to the forest, and enjoy a wide vista. If there was anywhere we were going to see a tiger by the full moon, this was it.

Ajahn Sucitto had told me earlier about his previous experience of tigers. It was on a visit he made to a national park in Thailand as part of a trip with a Japanese Theravadan monk known for his fierce application to meditation practice—so fierce that even Ajahn Sucitto had been concerned that he would be unable to keep up. However, most of the journey had been more like a pleasant holiday than a harsh *dhutanga* trip—except, that is, for the nights in the park. The Japanese monk had suggested they spend several nights in a place particularly known for tigers, and that each of them, the two monks and their accompanying novice, should be completely on their own. Ajahn Sucitto had been left in the blackness of a moonless night seated on his small sitting cloth, surrounded by prime tiger habitat. He had told me that the Japanese monk's intention, to use fear to aid wakefulness, had worked wonderfully: Ajahn Sucitto spent the whole night bolt upright. Every slight rustle in the grass he imagined as a tiger. He said he felt completely exposed, "like a meat ball waiting on a plate." Then, near midnight, he heard something approaching from behind. It was large…he could distinctly hear the footfalls…it was getting close…he could hear the breathing…smell an animal…he was petrified! His body was frozen with fear. And then "something" touched him in the small of his back, and in that moment he prepared to die…. When, in the next moment nothing happened, his mind exploded with relief and joy!

I roared with laughter as he described it all. He never found out what

it was. The animal turned and padded away, and he was left, pondering his mortality. Having given up his life, he said he felt strangely free of concern over death.

On our full-moon night I got to find out what he meant about fear keeping one wide awake. I had wanted to do the sitting there because we might see tiger, and I kept assuring myself that a tiger would never attack two stationary human beings, but still the same fear rose up in me. At least with the moonlight I could sit with my eyes open, scanning the grassland. The moon made the grass look silver, while the more distant trees were black. An owl came by silently quartering the short grass; then there was the far-off barking of a male deer. Later came alarm calls of chital, possibly indicating a tiger was hunting. Mostly, though, there was nothing happening—except in my mind. Every rustle of grass or slight movement in the trees behind us would re-ignite the fear. "Tigers don't attack humans unless they are man-eaters…the park authorities would kill any man-eaters here…tigers won't be bothered by two stationary humans (absolutely stationary!)…tigers aren't a danger…SHIT WHAT WAS THAT!" and so on. Slowly, however, with nothing happening my mind settled, stopped worrying, and began to enjoy the tigerless night.

About 1 A.M. we stopped to take a break and I lit a small fire and brewed some tea. We were both very tired. We settled back against our rock with the tea, all thoughts of tiger forgotten. Suddenly there was the most deafening roar from right behind our heads, my hands shot out throwing my tea everywhere. We both spun round to see a massive male bison rearing right above us! It turned, charged straight up the near-vertical wall of the *nullah*, and disappeared into the forest. I realised it must have come down the dry stream bed and been unable to see us hidden behind the rock until it was right over us. Of course! The stream bed that we'd parked ourselves in was the path used by animals coming down to the river to drink! I had been utterly stupid. Dil had told us to sit on the edge of the forest, but I had been too tired to bother

remembering. As it was it could just as well have been a tiger that had found us. And startled like that, a tiger might not have turned and run. It could have killed us!

AJAHN SUCITTO

Walking across Chitwan was, for me, fairly easy. The muscular fatigue of winding up and down long knee-crunching slopes gave way to the dullness of a humid valley. For a day or so we were in forests that had Nick poised and trembling with binoculars then lunging after things that flapped hastily out of sight. Wildlife slowed down when we came to the grasslands. For a long while we saw very little apart from the occasional soldier or jeep, then rhino moored in muddy ponds or occasionally drifting across the ocean of young grass in the burnt areas. You could get to within five or six metres of them, which was nice; they have such unbelievable bodies, looking like they have been clumsily assembled from parts—like creatures from a pantomime, or the first working models for ruminant life.

On the third day, Nick slowed down too, to a lumbering proto-human with minimal speech faculty. At first I thought it was just that we had only had a couple of hours' sleep after the full-moon sitting.—that and the humidity. But even the stop at Tiger Tops, where they gave us coffee and doughnuts for breakfast, failed to pick him up, and then a rest for the meal in a watchtower above the grassy sea barely restored him. I started attending to him more closely, as much with the heart as with the eyes. I could feel a vulnerable human lurking beneath, despite his Love and Power. The need to attend to him gave me more energy and interest in what was going on.

We continued on a long straight track covered with the white petals of sal trees. For a while the land was all very recently burnt with blackened trunks rising out of the cinders. The humidity broke into a warm downpour, which felt good and scented the air with the tang of burnt

earth. By dusk on that third day we had only covered about nineteen kilometres before arriving at Kasra Durbar, the park's headquarters, for the night.

I was still seeing the park as a wildlife reserve, so Kasra seemed strange. For a start, Chitwan seemed to have a considerable use as a military base: we had passed several military posts on the walk, and Kasra's use was indicated by a parade ground with soldiers drilling. Construction work was going on, but many of the buildings were in disrepair, and apart from a museum there was very little for a visitor to see.

The assistant warden fired up Nick briefly with talk on conservation, but guessing that he would soon lapse into dull vacuity, I took notes and collected what information I could for his future reference. Apart from all the stuff about rhinos and tigers and bears, sambar, spotted deer, hog deer, barking deer, several species of wild cats and all, there was the gloom. Human pressures: they'd moved 22,000 people out of the valley when the park was created, hungry people who lived off the land and now lived round the park. So there were always difficulties with people cutting for firewood and timber and grazing their water buffalo in the park. The burning of the grassland was done by the villagers to improve the grazing. The park staff allowed it because it also maintained the grassland for the wildlife. Poaching was negligible thanks to the army, but now the military were established here with sizeable bases. Visitors to the park brought in about 14 million Nepalese rupees per year, but only 100,000 of those rupees were allocated towards park maintenance. As it was, none of the park service's six jeeps were working, and with no money to repair them, the 350 square miles were monitored by means of one motor-bike.

All night the sky was tense, convulsing with sheet lightning. No thunder, no rain. Sleep was borderline, a kind of dreamy delirium rather than a rest. The next day Nick was so weak that I carried the food, and when we stopped in another watchtower for the meal I knew things were getting worse for him. Totally uninterested in eating, and with a

few dismissive mumbles, he sprawled in a corner. I left him for an hour or so, then gradually coaxed him to have a few nuts, then a biscuit, one at a time…it was like befriending some damaged wild creature that you find huddled up in your garden shed. After three hours, we clambered down the tower's ladder and, gently now, moved on. I let the park move through me. In what was most important, things were going well.

NICK

My memory of our walk through Chitwan becomes more and more hazy the farther on we got. Firstly there was the effect of the all-night sitting, then the heat and the humidity of the grasslands, and then I was struck down with dysentery. We were still walking through the kind of habitat that delighted me, but my complete lack of vitality diminished the impression it made.

Of course I remember the rhinos. We got so close. We could nearly touch them, wallowing in their mud baths, toads perched on their backs. To begin with we were wary of the danger and would pass them without stopping, all the while checking for trees we could climb, or at least dash behind, if one should get angry. Dil had told us to find a BIG tree if one charged, and if there wasn't one, to stand our ground until the last moment—then step out of its way! They were so slow at turning, and so stupid, he said, that if they charged past they would keep on going and were likely to forget what they were charging. Eventually we had passed so many without incident and they seemed such harmless creatures, wallowing in the mud or munching at grass, that we got more confident and would walk up to the side of a mud hole and stand there watching them. Ajahn Sucitto commented that, from behind, their thick loose skin with large warts on it looked like a gigantic pair of spotted bloomers.

The other memory is of being struck by how tall the unburnt patches of grass were. They formed a dense wall, up to twenty feet high, with

tunnels shoved through it by the rhino. And how short the rhino were, five foot tall at the most, though they were nearly as broad—like rugby prop forwards. But as the day heated up I became less interested, and the rest has faded.

My memory of the next day is even worse. The only two images I have of the park are the first jeep of the day coming roaring towards us with multi-coloured tourists hanging out of it, cameras at the ready for rhino, and the watchtower where I collapsed. I recall intending to look out for sloth bears that we had been told about at the headquarters, and how we had to whack them on their snout if they attacked, but I can't remember looking for them. Next is the village of Saura outside the park. That was because of the cold fruit juice and Coke—the first things I had been interested in all day.

Beyond Saura had been tall grassland and sal forest until fewer than thirty years before. A few hacked-over remnants of giant trees now stood gauntly amidst the wheat fields that stretched to the distant hills. We walked through that landscape to the main road to catch the bus to Hetaura. When it came we clambered up on to the roof again and settled amidst the luggage.

The little red diary now has: "Warm breeze, hills one mile to left, road gradually rising to stars, grey band of Rapti to right. Finest bus ride." And it's right. The hills were the Mahabharat Lekhs, and we were climbing because the Rapti valley was narrowing to a gorge that runs between them and the Siwaliks. The road went over a shoulder of the hills to avoid it. I lay on the slatted wooden roof, head resting on the luggage, and looked out across the valley filled with dark forest, broken only by the grey line of the Rapti.

There were flickers of regret that we had not walked on through the park below, but really I knew it would have been foolish. It was too hot and humid, and I was far, far too sick. I also realise now that even if I had been well, it would have been pushing our luck. At the time I had assured myself that we were in little danger, that as the park had so many tour-

ists, none of the wildlife were likely to attack humans. When I got back I told a naturalist friend that and he snorted, telling me lots of people were killed by the few tigers left in India and that a close friend of his had been killed only a couple of years before. He had been leading a bird-watching trip and had left the party to get a photograph of an owl in a tree. He must have chanced upon a tiger, just as we might have, because when they found him his leg had been eaten. When they developed his film it had pictures of a tiger, first side on, pacing one way and then the other, then turned, and much nearer, about to spring for the kill.

Then there are also the sloth bears, snakes, and crocodiles! To say nothing of the rhinos, which also regularly kill people. I read a book written by biologists who were studying the tigers of Chitwan Park. They felt safe enough watching a tiger from a distance, but every time they saw a rhino they climbed a tree for safety! They described how a local man was killed by a rhino while they were there. He was walking down the same track we took when a rhino suddenly turned on him, charging and knocking him over as he dashed for a tree. The rhino trampled him, then tore open his stomach with its teeth, and he bled to death. All in all, we were fortunate to come out alive!

The biologists also write of their concerns for Chitwan. When they were first working there in the 1970s there was still good forest outside the boundary that connected it with other tiger reserves in India, but now all that has gone, and Chitwan is effectively an island. This means that the big animals will suffer from inbreeding, and the small populations could easily be wiped out by a single catastrophe—particularly disastrous for the Indian rhino as it only hangs on in Chitwan and in one reserve in India. Then there is the surrounding human population. On the evening of our first visit, as we sat looking out over the Gandak River watching the sunset, a large herd of domestic cattle appeared from the tall grassland and was driven across by a man and a boy, the cattle wading, then swimming in the deeper water with each of the herdsmen astride one of their backs. The soldiers effectively guard the rhino from

poachers with a shoot-to-kill policy, but they can hardly use that on local peasants grazing their cattle.

I tell bed-time stories to my friend's children, and the story that gets regular requests is about walking through the jungles of India and meeting the wildlife. The bit they love is "what do you do if you meet" a tiger, a rhino, an elephant, or any of the other creatures we met or might have met. It is not the instructions that so delights them but the possibility of meeting these wonderful creatures. It taps into something deeper for all of us. We can find being amidst nature so uplifting—even when we are in ordinary English oak woodland, without tigers or the big wild creatures it once supported. It has a rightness about it, a completeness, an at-homeness. That is where, as a species, we grew up.

When I tell my bed-time story, I always end with how "the really, REALLY, dangerous wild creatures we have to beware of are…" and they look expectantly "…humans!" I might just tell them how on the pilgrimage it was men who actually attacked us and nearly killed me, not the wild animals, but sometimes I try to explain more. *Homo sapiens* are such an arrogant species. We can't see how much we need the rest of nature to remain sane ourselves. The conservation movement has only managed to get a few parks put aside for the rest of the beings on this planet while we ourselves continue to breed like rabbits. We have gotten rid of most of the things that kept our numbers in check, not just tigers, but snakes, malaria, cholera, and all the rest, too, and now we can't restrain ourselves. What we need as a species is humility.

The Buddhist suttas describe a time when the people lived in cultivated clearings, beside the rivers. These were islands, surrounded by the great forest, the *Mahavana*. The tales of the pilgrims who visited over the subsequent centuries continue to refer to the forest and its wildlife. But now, as we write our tale, the Ganges plain is a sea of cultivation with just a few threatened islands of forest and wildness left. The same is now happening to the whole planet. While we increasingly enjoy nature on television our need to become, do, make, and reproduce is relentlessly

consuming, at an ever faster rate, what nature there is left. At some point soon we will have to wake up. If we do not recognise within ourselves the greed, the becoming, the over-breeding, and learn the Buddha's basic lesson, that we can choose not to follow our conditioning, there is going to be nothing left to tell stories about.



26

The Play of Creation

AJAHN SUCITTO

April 3rd. And another shift in the play.

Our contact in Hetaura was another Bajracarya friend of Chhatra Raj, whom he had described as "a second Anathapindika." Maharatana ("Great Jewel") Bajracarya was as renowned for his largesse as for his skills as a businessman, and Chhatra Raj was sure that even without his note we would be well taken care of. "He will only be disappointed that there are just two of you," he said. "He has a whole apartment block to accommodate bhikkhus in," and had apparently done so for visiting entourages.

Well he'd have to make do with one bhikkhu and a bedraggled layman. We didn't even need the note to find Mr. Bajracarya's shop. Wandering along the main street of Hetaura, I plumped for the best house and shop front—that of a goldsmith—but before we could approach the door, someone ushered us in. Maharatana Bajracarya was obviously an important man in the town.

The shop interior extended back a way, into increasingly sacrosanct zones. The fragrance of incense welcomed us, and my ear focused and lingered on the steady tones of someone chanting softly. Beneath a small collection of paintings of Vajrayana sages and protective deities, an old

man was working at his small goldworker's anvil with a delicate hammer. The goldwork was fine, exquisite: tiny flakes shaped and assembled into nose-rings like miniature chrysanthemum blossoms; other anvils were the crucibles for slender gold wire to be transmuted into rings. There was a mood of calm and the kind of sanctity of attention that you would associate with a monastery where manuscripts were being illuminated. Perhaps it *was* that in a way—the handful of people working were all male; perhaps it was a descendent from the old Newari *viharas*, an echo of the era when the Vajracaryas of old had moved out of their purely monastic role into first ritual and then commercial functions.

Mr. Bajracarya soon appeared on the scene and was definitely no throw-back. I've met successful Buddhist businessman like him from Thailand and Sri Lanka: well, but not extravagantly, dressed, with a modest amount of gold on the fingers; composed with the confidence that worldly success breeds and requires, yet easily respectful with bhikkhus. Tall and comfortably built, he drew us into his inner room, a sanctum behind a wrought-iron grille, and with an effortless wave of one hand made soft drinks appear. The womenfolk peered through the grille into our male world where, through seating arrangements, distance, and tone of voice, the subtle balance of mutual respect and self-confidence was established. Strangely enough, Mr. B had no English, but Hindi was good enough to manage the comparatively minor matter of verbal exchange. Talk on Dhamma revealed that he was a meditator, and had received teachings from Mr. Goenka, himself a former businessman. However, business was calling and there was much to do. Tomorrow he was going to Darjeeling, so the elder son Jyoti would be taking over as host.

We stayed a couple of nights in the three-storey apartment block nearby, with Nick sick and resting most of the time. Mr. B's sons and I meditated together, and they showed me around the family home with its array of religious paintings from Thailand and *thangkas* from Tibet, as well as Newari art and beautifully worked bronzes, and some mag-

nificent Buddha images. It was a splendid display, the images of Awakening in all their subtle and well-crafted forms; far more graceful than the flesh and blood practice of liberation.

Even after a full day's rest, Nick was far from his usual buoyant self. Of course, he *thought* he was ready, and our next destination, Bimphedi, was only twenty-three kilometres away on what seemed to be an undemanding route. The first few kilometres out of Hetaura we were on main road, seemed easy enough, and by mid-morning, we had reached the turn off to Bimphedi, a rock-strewn dirt track. It had been the main porter's trail, cutting across the mountains and getting to Kathmandu after forty-five kilometres. It was our obvious route—the motor road wound around the mountains for 130 kilometres before arriving at the capital; the dirt track took the heavily laden porters only two days. However, knowing the ways of the goddess, I wasn't making any plans.

Sure enough, the wind went out of Nick's sails shortly after leaving the road. His flags were down. Rather fittingly, he'd lost his Love and Power hat somewhere, and by the time the heat turned up in the late morning he was reduced to wearing a pair of underpants on his head for some shelter. After another half an hour or so, I looked around to see that he'd lost those too. We pulled up before midday at the top of a small rise, where a banyan and a bodhi tree shaded a small shrine. Nick went over and down like a wrecked galleon. I got him to eat a bit and drink the milk that Jyoti had given us. There was nothing else to do but sit here, find the central point, and meditate.

It was pleasant under that tree with my awareness extending to take in Nick, the cool shady shrine, and the river flowing beneath us; and where we were going and where we had been. Then it rested in where we were, in where we are. Suffering, origin, cessation, path. The trembling of having somewhere to go, and "what if" tugged at my mind, but Nick's inertia pointed like a compass needle back to the present. There the radiant Buddha was turning the wheel of the Law; and in his hands, the goddess of suffering, so lavishly worshipped with our views and ambitions,

unveiled her loving face. Compassion: be that. That's all we're here for. Momentarily the wrappings of time and place unpeeled….

The shade moved around the shrine. Eventually Nick began to surface, haul himself up, make a few noises…and we were struggling off in the heat of the afternoon, struggling up that rocky trail, that ancient path; him with his head down, and me up front, turning from time to time to watch him and worry about how far it would be. But where was there to get to anyway? In geographical terms, the end that we had agreed on, the final peak, was the valley; the Kathmandu Valley. The route from Tansen to Chitwan had progressively (through a hundred ups and a hundred and one downs) rubbed down the 1300 metres to a mere remnant of altitude, and from Hetaura to the valley itself we were toiling through a hundred and one ups and a hundred downs to arrive back at that 1300 metre mark, at another valley. That seemed to sum up the inner journey too. It felt like a deep return to some basic inner ground, a shift out of the play of ups and downs achieved through a process of wearing out the reactions to highs, lows, beginnings and endings, and even arrival. Maybe the result was a kind of dispassion towards it all, and yes I guess we were getting pretty near to that.

Still there remained a lingering mystique to the pilgrimage. Its notional end was at the most sacred shrine of the Kathmandu Valley, Swayambhunath, the "self-originated." To the ordinary eye, Swayambhu is an impressive stupa on top of a hill, but it also is an emblem in a myth that makes the Valley sacred. In the myth, that "self-originated" was a timeless presence that dwelt in a vast lake, immeasurably enriching its waters. "Swayambhu" was the very essence of Buddhahood, unpeeled from any form. And countless aeons ago, Vipassi Buddha, one of that lineage of conquerors of whom Gotama was the last and Maitreya the next, came to circumabulate the lake in reverence. Into its still waters he cast a seed, a lotus seed that would, he prophesied, bloom into a flower that would be a seat for that supreme essence. And as aeons came and went and Buddhas arose and passed away in the human realm,

that seed blossomed into the *bodhi-mandala*, the circle that is the place of awakening in the world of form. Then the bodhisattva Manjushri, the wisest of all those who vow to share awakening with all sentient beings, came from the north mounted on his snow lion. With the *vajra* sword that cuts through all delusion, he sliced through the hills that surround the lake, allowing the sacred waters to flow out and bless the land. And the radiant presence of the self-originated, too powerful for profane eyes to gaze upon, was capped and crowned by a hill. On that hill kings built a shrine long ago, before history could record it, to serve as an image of that *mandala*.

The *stupa* is too sacred, too alive, to allow archaeologists to go digging for history beneath its shell. It has in time nevertheless developed and formed like Buddhism itself, arising out of something that can't be traced to become a metaphor and a way to the trackless state. The shrine to Swayambhu was wrecked of course by Muslim raiders, but being dependent on a still-vital religion, it was able to arise again. High and lofty, it overlooks Kathmandu, shaping, and being gradually shaped by, the cultural genius of the Newars. So the pilgrimage had to have its conclusion there, at Swayambhu, in that valley that is as high as a mountain.

Meanwhile, I was wondering how Nick was getting on ascending his own mountain. Late in that afternoon we did arrive at Bimphedi, but immediately after that, the peaks and some tough climbing began. Yet even though he had barely been able to drag himself up a gently sloping path for most of the day, the cooling of the late afternoon, the sense of arrival in the lovely old town, and some time unwinding over a cold soft drink made the mood of the moment positive: therefore, to his mind, everything was possible again. So he had to be talked out of attempting the climb that very evening. At least that was getting easier—we didn't polarise with such intensity any more. At times I could even experience us as a comic duo, bouncing lines and gestures off each other. Surely no one could better throw all my stock attitudes so vividly into relief as Nick! The unflagging optimism, the almost pathological over-reach-

ing, and the ability to shrug off the last disaster with a casual remark! Compared with him, I have been a stranger at a funeral for most of my life: someone who is not certain who they should be mourning but who doesn't want to get it wrong by acting loud.

For someone endowed with Nick's self-confidence, experiences of limitation and inadequacy must have been more effective steps on the inner path than successes. His progress was more a matter of descent. And this turn of the journey seemed to be providing him with plenty of those. Our host in Bimphedi, M. D. Shrestha (a friend of the Great Jewel), counselled that the climb out of the town was a strenuous one, and the next morning we found out that he wasn't exaggerating. For me it was just a matter of a steady grind uphill; first-gear work with occasional pauses to relieve the pounding heart, and a few more to allow Nick to catch up and sink down. By then I had already been initiated into the company of those who feel they can barely make it. But pausing now and then to wait for my struggling companion, I wondered how well he could adapt to the change of role.

NICK

That climb! It was the hardest I have ever done. The dysentery left me with nothing. My legs felt like matchsticks covered in a thin layer of something insubstantial that was definitely not muscle. I felt faint just contemplating each upward step. All I wanted to do was sit down—for the whole climb.

We set out from the village guided by Shrestha, and as we crossed the valley I did not feel that bad. Weak, yes, and listlessly uninterested in the landscape, but I had known that many times on the walk when dysentery had struck and I had always managed to walk on, but then I had never had to make a Himalayan climb. Shrestha told us it would take one and a half hours and that we would be over it and down to Kulikani in time to eat. The hill was a wall of green turf dotted with trees and criss-crossed with

slight ledges made by grazing animals. We were to go straight up and join a jeep track at the distant top. Even the first few steps were hard, but I kept going as I did not want to worry him, still in sight on the valley's far side. As soon as we got behind the first tree I stopped to get enough breath to tell Ajahn Sucitto just how difficult I was finding it.

There was one good thing about our bouts of dysentery: the two of us never had them at the same time. That always left one of us to keep the pilgrimage going. You might feel like death and only want to curl up in a brain-dead ball, but you were still capable of hanging on to your companion's motivation and could just stumble along after him. This time Ajahn Sucitto even ended up carrying my bag as I had trouble enough just getting my body up the face of that hill. I couldn't even glance at the steep slope above. All I could do was focus on the next step…. "raise the leg and put it up there…now somehow get my body up above it…raise the next leg…NO STOPPING!…somehow raise…." Each time I stopped I would look up to see Ajahn Sucitto standing waiting, with a look of concern, for my next step.

It was that damn rule on not eating after noon again. I'm certain the Buddha never meant us to be ruled by the minute and second hands of watches. But that is how it was, and I had to keep going if we were to get to Kulikani in time to eat. And I did want to eat. I'd kept nothing of the breakfast, and I wanted something that would give me some energy, even if it lasted only fifteen minutes before I had to run to the bushes.

I have looked at that hill on maps, and it is a two-thousand-foot ascent. That's no doddle even when you are feeling fit and well. Somehow I did eventually make it to the top, and with only half a dozen stops, but it was slow going. Once there I could walk at a more reasonable pace. I could even take in the beauty of the forest we were passing through—a mixture of evergreen oaks, other hardwood trees, the occasional tall upright conifer, and rhododendrons hanging from crags—but even though I could then use the weight of gravity to stumble quickly down the other side, we had little time left for getting a meal.

Ahead of us, an English-speaking local we had briefly met farther back on the track, disappeared into a house. It was a rundown shop-cum-drinking den, with a couple of old signs for spirits in the window and a few odd jars of things for sale inside. Ajahn Sucitto thought it an inappropriate place for us, but the only other building in sight was a large concrete dam in the valley bottom with a small hydroelectric plant, and there was no time left for looking further. Inside the shop the English speaker got the owner to make us rice, *dhal*, and vegetables while he drank some *chang*. And when he saw how few vegetables the shop could produce, he gave us some tomatoes he was carrying.

My body, miraculously, hung on to that meal eaten in Kulikani. There were flies crawling across it, the crockery was dirty, and the food oily and hot with chilli, but I suppose the body knew it had no choice. It gave me the energy to climb up a cliff to Kulikani proper. The village was just a half a dozen houses on a flat ledge of land, an old river terrace now suspended above and between the two valleys. The valleys joined below it and dropped away so steeply that we could see no bottom (the diary, more poetically, has "valleys as deep as bassoons").

We were in the Mahabharat Lekhs again. Most of it was covered in forest and for the first time I noticed how it was distinctly zoned, with conifers further up the slope, becoming more frequent the further up I looked. Around the village I recognised plants from home: brambles were just coming into flower; then in the grass turf beside the path, violets, clover, and forget-me-nots; and best of all, birds-eye primrose, one of my favourites from the hills of northern England. We were high enough in the mountains to be in a zone with a similar climate. In the next valley we disturbed two iridescent male jungle fowl with their dun-coloured hens scratching on the path ahead. They dashed off into the bushes as we got close. Later I had a brief glimpse through the trees of the even more exotic looking kalij pheasant. The steep slopes in the foothills of the Himalayas are the last sanctuary for many of these species of jungle fowl. Elsewhere they have been hunted to extinction.

As always when I get into such untouched pockets of wildlife my mind turned to protecting it. I thought about the arguments over the remaining forests in the Himalayan foothills. Conservationists claiming that the clearing of the forest has resulted in an increase in landslides and the erosion of topsoil so that the big rivers issuing from the mountains are now even heavier with silt. The plumes of darkness that can be seen in satellite photographs spreading out into the Indian Ocean at the Bay of Bengal are the eroded soils of Nepal. They blame the regular flooding in Bangladesh, and the resulting human misery, on the increased run-off in the mountains. These arguments were being used to try to stop the commercial logging of the forests that remain. I understood why they argued like that. Such economic arguments tend to have more sway than trying to protect the last home of a strange pheasant. But for those of us that find solace in nature, just the cutting down of these last pristine forests can cause so much heartache. I used to respond to the problems, when I let myself look at them, either with despair and pain or with anger, but most of the time I would just bury myself in action. It was difficult to find the right perspective. I used to fantasise about somehow getting rid of 99 percent of the world's population so that the wildlife could recover. But that would be the worst genocide in history! *And* it wouldn't work; people would just multiply again. Of course I excluded anyone I might know, or have met—anyone I recognised as another being like me. Others, particularly in religious and New Age movements, seem to want false hope, a magic formula that will "save the world." Now I have learnt to simply accept the way things are. As well as being more peaceful I found I was more able to do something when it was possible. I could see what really motivated others. Then I couldn't get angry with them, let alone want to kill them all. And understanding the other point of view helps, sometimes, to get things changed.

That night in Nepal, we were wakened by a few of the world's multitude that I once wanted to kill. They were walking the path in the dark with flashlights—returning from drinking at an inn I suspect—and

stumbled upon us lying by a stream. They wanted to help and offered us accommodation, but when we refused and said we wanted to stay where we were, they accepted it easily and went on their way, their voices echoing up the valley.

Up until our climb towards Kathmandu we had been passing through the majority Hindu culture of much of the foothills. The peoples there originate from a series of migrations, mostly from the plains of India in response to periods of persecution. But we were now climbing into the east central area of Nepal, where most of the people are of Tibeto-Burman descent and often Buddhist. These tribes migrated in waves from Southeast Asia starting in the early millennia B.C.E. The Newars are supposed to have originally been one long ago: there must have been a lot of mixing since then. That day we climbed up to a village of one of the tribes that have come more recently. We knew they weren't Hindu because we could see the Buddhist *choetens* up on the pass we were making for—stones piled up to make a crude *stupa*, supporting fluttering Buddhist prayer flags atop long bamboo poles. It was hard going that morning, the path wound in and out of small side valleys, and up, down, and around the sides of steep slopes hardly getting any nearer, until at last we came to the long climb to the pass. I had hoped that if the people ahead were Buddhist they might recognise Ajahn Sucitto as a monk, take us in, and feed us. The village on the other side did have a Buddhist temple with ornate Vajrayana Buddhist icons on the shrine, and the people were probably Tamang, one of the more recent Tibeto-Burman tribes who settled in the hills around Kathmandu, but it didn't help. A Theravada Buddhist monk registered no response in their culture.

From there the walking became easy. There was a real road again, winding down and around the hillside to a wide valley down below, awash with bright green paddy fields. We could see the small town of Parphing, reachable in time to buy some food. We had arrived, at last, at an outpost of the Kathmandu Valley.

When we got to Parphing, as well as the bustle of a small mod-

ern town with the first cars, buses, and lorries since Hetaura, we also found the other main constituent of Nepal's population, the Tibetans. There always were Tibetan tribes in Nepal, the small, once-independent Tibetan kingdoms in the high mountain valleys like Dolpo, Mustang, and the kingdom of the Sherpas. But now there are other Tibetans in Nepal; many of the 1.5 million refugees who have fled Chinese Communist rule have ended up there. Parphing turned out to be quite a centre for them. Two large Tibetan monasteries loomed over it on the side of the hill, one of which we stopped in to pay our respects to the shrine; and half of the shops seemed to be run by Tibetans. As we walked into town, there were young monks everywhere, hanging out on the street corners, listening to rock music on a transistor radio, and sharing a Pepsi in the cafe we ate in. Some of them smiled in our direction, nodding in recognition—at something Buddhist or just our novelty, I couldn't say. The group of young monks who directed us to the cafe seemed particularly taken with us and smiled profusely. But beside me, Ajahn Sucitto didn't respond; I had the feeling that he didn't approve of all this very un-bhikkhu-like behaviour.

AJAHN SUCITTO

April 5th. Not much food in the mountains; eating is a valley thing. For me it was perhaps the only thing I liked about Parphing; all the razzmatazz was definitely not my scene. But then we came around the last slope before the valley, and it was all change; I felt a trace of the impression that the mountain men and the heavily laden porters must have when they see it. The landscape, as it slowly opened to the north before us, was a sweeping sea of green with terraced hills rising out of it and settlements strewn over it like foam. To the east, the land faded out of sight in the warm haze, but directly ahead of us lay the urban area of Kathmandu and its neighbouring city of Patan (also known as Lalitpur – 'city of Sacred Play'). Swayambhunath rose to the west of them. Even

in this age with cars and concrete buildings in evidence, the perception of Shangri-la still hovered in my mind.

Our approach was slow and in stages, like an initiation into the fertility of life. The first stop was a Hindu temple built into an overhanging rock face that was lush with nasturtiums and ferns. The main images indicated that the temple was dedicated to Vishnu, here called Narayan, the life-affirmer. Many smaller images of erotic play grinned down from its walls with the innocence of children playing with their bodies: a Shangri-la version of sexuality.

After that we came into the populated areas. We had the address of Nagar Mandap Shree Kirti Vihara in Kirtipur, a small town southwest of Kathmandu; so we thought to head farther down the road to there, take a rest, and collect ourselves before Swayambhunath. After a while, following some questions and gestures, we left the road and made our way across the paddy fields to one of the small hills that carried the towns and villages of the valley. The town was a few quietly winding streets lined with brick houses, occasional courtyards with *stupas* in them, children playing, no traffic, and—carrying water or squatting at their endless patient tasks—bright-faced women whose heads were not shrouded by the hood of their saris. There was gentle laughter at these two awkwardly tall strangers.

The temple was not an easy find; it was over to the extreme east of the town looking down a slope over the fields. We came across it after trailing a cat's cradle of long looping streets that passed us round and round and up and down, making our knees go to jelly before they would allow us to arrive. They were living, dancing streets, with shrines in their navels; people flowing along them participated in their play by passing the shrines respectfully on their right, occasionally pausing for a prayer or to offer flowers, or to daub the holy images with pigment. Some shrines, like those bearing an image of Ganesh, were obviously Hindu, others of the peculiar Newari Buddhist iconography that was reminiscent of the images from Nalanda that we had seen in Vaishali

and Patna museums. After the vast skies and massive simplicity of the mountains, the intricately sculpted work of the shrines was mind-seizing. And they were just a part of the whole. Beautifully carved wooden window frames gazed down into lanes and courtyards that were open but still intimate. A warm human vitality defined the way in which the town wound itself around the hill. Fed by sacred imagery, the streets were like living blood vessels linking the various levels of public and private human life with the land and with each other. With the mind feeling that rhythm, and the body going numb, it was difficult to attend to where we were going.

Venerable Sudarshan Mahathera greeted us at the *vihara*. He was quick and acute, speaking good English and attending promptly to our needs whilst overseeing everything else at the *vihara*. We stayed with him for a couple of days, soaking up his information on Kirtipur and Buddhism in Nepal. "The city of glory" was the translation of its name. It had been one of the last of the Malla city-states to hold out against the invading Gurkhas in the 1760s. But Prithvi Narayan Shah, the first of the Gurkha monarchs conquered it in the end after a long and desperate siege. Afterwards, some folk called it "Naskatipur" ("city of cut-noses"), for in retribution for Prithvi's brother losing an eye in the siege, the conqueror ordered that all the adult males of Kirtipur have their noses and lips cut off.

All except the musicians. Even the mountain men had a taste for the consummate artistry of the Newars. Looking at Kirtipur, at how its human creations so allowed for and connected the moods of home, market, and temple, culture took on a new meaning. Art has a way of making life manageable; it creates connections that help the mind to move through difficult or intangible themes.

And the *vihara* itself presented a synthesis. The roof of its temple building, which our living quarters overlooked, was capped with four large images: of Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar. Our pilgrimage in a nutshell, placed up there at the bequest of the Sangharaja

of Nepal. It all looked so small, like child's play, from where we were standing. Hardly worth writing a book about.

NICK

It was at the Kirtipur *vihara* that I was really struck with how modern and "Western" the Theravada tradition in Nepal was. It was partially the modern facilities at the *vihara* (I particularly appreciated the well-kept Western-style bathroom, as my dysentery returned with a vengeance). But it wasn't just the *vihara* that was modern and Western; Bhante's outlook was a modern Western one, too. His way of thinking was rational and scientific—a bit like a modern Christian minister who gives rational explanations for all Christ's miracles.

Bhante's outlook was something I had noticed about the other Theravadan Newars we had met. I had come to suspect it was why they were following Theravada Buddhism and were so dismissive of the old Vajrayana tradition of their people. They were the educated members of their caste, and they explained their change in terms of wanting to revitalise their religion. Were that the only reason, they could have turned to the more dynamic and close-by Tibetan Buddhism. But that was still too esoteric. It was ironic really: they were rejecting the old ways because they were irrational just when many Westerners were showing such interest in the Vajrayana Buddhist teachings often because it was esoteric and non-rational.

Not me though. It was Tibetan Buddhism that I originally encountered in my wanderings along the base of the Himalayas but had been put off by it being so irrational. I had visited Sikkim, a small, and at that time, independent state between Nepal and Bhutan and had stopped at a large new Tibetan monastery. There I was put in a small accommodation block, next door to a young Canadian monk who came to tell me that I had been invited for an audience with "the Karmapa" and that he was to translate. I had no idea who "the Karmapa" was, or that he was the head

of one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist sects, the Kagyu. To me, when I met him, he just seemed a large and jolly chap prone to guffaws of laughter while rocking about on the bed in his private apartment. I remember something about banknotes and laughing at the pictures on them and him insisting I had to come to a ceremony the next morning, which a wealthy Tibetan had travelled a long way to sponsor. I now realise the bank notes must have been a subtle hint but it was lost on me at the time.

So I had ended up in a large temple, with myself and the Tibetan sponsor sitting alone at the front, flanked by rows of monks. Before us was the Karmapa, raised on a throne and surrounded by silk cushions. The chanting seemed to go on forever, deep and resonating; it washed around the dimly lit hall, the rhythm kept by the tapping of small drums. Amidst the chanting were occasional deep bassoon-like blasts from a long trumpet, the ringing of a bell and the clash of cymbals from a monk just to my right. The monks, dressed in maroon and with peaked hats on, were all following books of long strips of paper, which they turned as they chanted. The Karmapa led, starting each chant with a deep growl, then, as he chanted, rocking gently from side to side to the rhythm like one of those round-bottomed dolls that never fall over. Each chant would end with him stopping suddenly, then the rest of the monks' voices would trail off as if someone had pulled the plug on them.

The ceremony seemed to be leading to a crescendo. The chanting was getting faster, becoming more insistent, there was more ringing of bells and clashing of cymbals, and then two monks came on from stage left with a silk-wrapped box, which they started to unwrap. The chanting and accompanying clashes and clangs got louder, and then the Karmapa took his hat off and handed it to one of the monks. The lid to the box was gently removed, and from inside he lifted, ever so carefully, a large black furry hat with gold trimmings that he gently placed on his head, all the while keeping one podgy-armed hand atop it. This appeared to be the peak of the ceremony; the Tibetan beside me was prostrate by now, and the hullabaloo from the monks was at its loudest. After what I

suppose was five minutes, the hat was put away, the box rewrapped, the chanting subsided, and eventually the whole thing came to an end. At the time I had absolutely no idea what it was all about.

It was not until six months later that I found out when I arrived in Darjeeling to stay with an English couple. They insisted I come that day to a ceremony the visiting Karmapa was about to do and the explanation came out on our way there: "thousands of Tibetans…very auspicious…hardly ever done before outside of Tibet…Black Hat ceremony." Sure enough the hillside was crowded with a sea of Tibetan faces, sprinkled with a few Western ones, and the monks had started the same initial chanting. They and the Karmapa, on his high cushioned throne, were under a large canopy. We were now mingling with the edge of the crowd, and my friends were whispering to me, "very auspicious…hat is magic…given to the first Karmapa in fifteenth century…gift from emperor of China…if he takes his hand off, it flies!"

At the time it just made me dismiss the whole of Tibetan Buddhism. But these days I have more respect for the irrational, despite having been trained as a scientist. If I hold on to the Western and scientific explanation for everything, I miss something very important—the feeling of awe that comes when I stop trying to explain this world.

Now I can see I was trapped in that Western world description, which is in fact no more "true" than any other. Darwinian evolution is a very useful description of this world, but that is all it is, a description and not reality. On the spiritual path eventually we have to let go of all descriptions, even Buddhist ones. For their part, the Newar Buddhists were weighed down by the beliefs and superstitions of their old Vajrayana religion. The accounts of their culture in books is fascinating stuff, and not just for anthropologists, but it is now very hard to use it for spiritual endeavour. That's why they have turned away from it.

We left Kirtipur the next day for Swayambhunath. Bhante had offered us a lift into Kathmandu, but I wanted to walk. This would be the last few miles of the pilgrimage, and even if I were feeling both sick and weak,

I wanted to do it on foot. The two of us trudged down a wide tarmac road, bustling with traffic: cars, motor scooters, the occasional bus, and many Nepalese on foot or bicycle. Most of the men were traditionally dressed with a flattened pillbox hat and wrapped in a light blanket over short dark jacket and jodhpur-like white trousers. We left the road at one point and crossed the paddy fields on a well-worn path. The city of Kathmandu was ahead, Swayambhunath to its left, and another town to our right that must have been Patan, and there were several main roads in sight full of traffic, but the background was the wide valley of paddy fields rising and falling in waves of bright green. The contours were created by several rivers that wound through the paddy fields, two of which we crossed. Round it all was the ring of mountains, the paddy fields lapping their lower slopes, with scrub above them and then above that, dark green forest that rose in jagged formations to the sky.

This wide valley would once have been a lake, dammed by glacial moraines. It would have silted up with sediment from those surrounding mountains until one day the water was released. Was that caused by a seismic quake or just the Bagmati River eroding into the moraine? Or was it Manjushri and his sword, as local legend has it? Does it really matter?

I was certainly not in a state to say; I was far too light-headed. Quite pleasant as long as I did not focus on anything. We had only a few miles to go, and I could amble along in a daze, enjoying the warmth of the afternoon sun and the changing impressions of our surroundings. We went through part of Kathmandu. I remember modern suburbs and leafy green gardens and then the central old town of elaborately carved wooden temples and crowded bustling streets. We arrived at the house where we had been invited for the meal, much of which I wasn't up to eating. Then we were heading out on the road to Swayambhunath, up on a hill ahead.

Ajahn Sucitto wanted to do the final climb in one go as a devotional exercise, which did seem right, in my vacant, accepting state—it was just that I couldn't physically manage it. The wide stone steps led steeply upwards between walls with trees overhanging. The walls narrowed

in the distance to a small gap that, I assured myself, must be the top. I climbed slowly yet steadily, but the world began to swim around me. My chest ached and tightened, and I gave in just before I fainted, sitting down suddenly on the step where I was. It took two more goes before I got to the top, long after Ajahn Sucitto, my last steps on jelly legs accompanied by some devotional singing drifting down from above. And then somehow I was there. White light…giant golden eyes…tinkling bells…a mesmerising devotional drone…elaborate fretted woodwork…strange people: musicians, monks, tourists…monkeys…and way below…. a little world of miniature houses, small green fields, and tiny people. My mind was well past trying to explain any of it. But it could open out into a tremendous feeling of awe.

AJAHN SUCITTO

It was a long climb up the steps to the self-originated, but I had enough mountain-madness to keep going.

That morning we'd arrived at another meal-offering, by women as usual, and another connection. Sister Uppalavanna, a middle-aged Nepalese nun, bowed to greet us with excited smiles. We called her Chini ("sugar"), as her friends did; she was a friend, and a special one too, of Sister Medhanandi at Amaravati. Sister Medhanandi, originally from Canada, had been working for a United Nations' nutrition project in Nepal when she met Chini. It didn't take long after that before she was leaving her job and heading for Burma to take ordination as a ten-precept nun. And while we had been struggling up our lonely hillsides, Medhanandi had contacted Chini…who in the midst of the bustle of Venerable Sudarshan arriving, and people trying to find room as they squeezed through the low doorway into the room, invited us to her house, in Patan, on Thursday—four days in the future.

It was lovely to enter the heart of the valley via my home monastery, Amaravati, "the deathless realm." And somehow the sense of being

received strikes a different chord when it comes through the feminine—like being welcomed back to bodily life. It always seems to be the women who are nourishing that sense of belonging, that bodily birth. Birth may be *dukkha*, but a good one is essential. Without that sense of belonging here, without being at ease with what one is as a person, it's hard for the mind to have the foundation for realising the unborn. One unconsciously uses the Buddha's realisation of "non-self" to lose touch with the realities of body and mind. Maybe what my journey and sickness had been about was a drastic wake-up call to care for this reality, whoever or whatever it belonged to.

Yes, the real challenge for a celibate bhikkhu is that if he can't rely on a relationship with a woman to provide him with a sense of being cared for, can he now be his own nourisher, can he be "self-born?" The Buddha's remedy was to urge an inward blossoming of the seed of the Dhamma. However, from what I've seen, not everyone is born in a rich enough soil. And even if a skilful cultivator can do it for himself, can we make our presence on this planet something that lifts others out of their lost dark spaces? What can an individual do to share his or her life with other people? In Newar-land, the men of the valley used the synthesising medium of art: perhaps a man's social duty, his gesture of connectedness in the society, has to be to give birth to works that will give it meaning.

For me, my work is pilgrim's work. It's not about getting anywhere, let alone to the top. It's about being more fully here and working out the tangles of being me. It's about presenting myself to that demanding practice, in an act of flesh and blood devotion. So, who was I climbing Swayambhu for? Nick dropped out somewhere along the way; there was no one to keep up with. For my mother, my father? They're dead, memories now. For the *sangha*? Was it for them, those mind-bursting steps—did I go on this pilgrimage for them? But so many of them have gone too, disrobed, since I came back intending to share my journey with them. Pabhakaro, Anando, Kittisaro, Santacitto, Nyanaviro…and

many more - we were mountain men. We had sat knee to knee in meditation; we had built monasteries together. Now we are looking for the green valley in separate realms. Of course, as I tell myself, it's not fair to expect everyone to follow the monastic form, what counts is authenticity…each to their own…and many of them are bringing the Dhamma across to others in lay life. But sometimes fellowship feels like a continually breaking circle to me, and I wonder who I am doing this for.

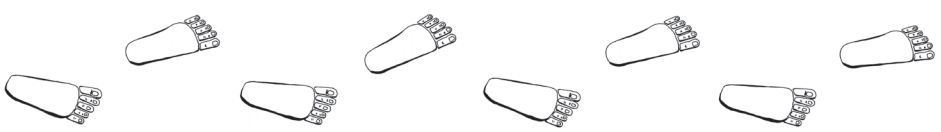
Beggars squatting on the steps, a few coins on cloths in front of them, hardly moved as I staggered breathlessly by. It's funny how long you can put energy into an illusion; sometimes it takes exhaustion to clear the mind. What can we ever bring back from our journeys anyway? How many travellers return to find that their friends have died, their lands ruined, their tales derided? When will we ever know that we never return, that we have to close our own circle by willingly embracing the suffering of separation?

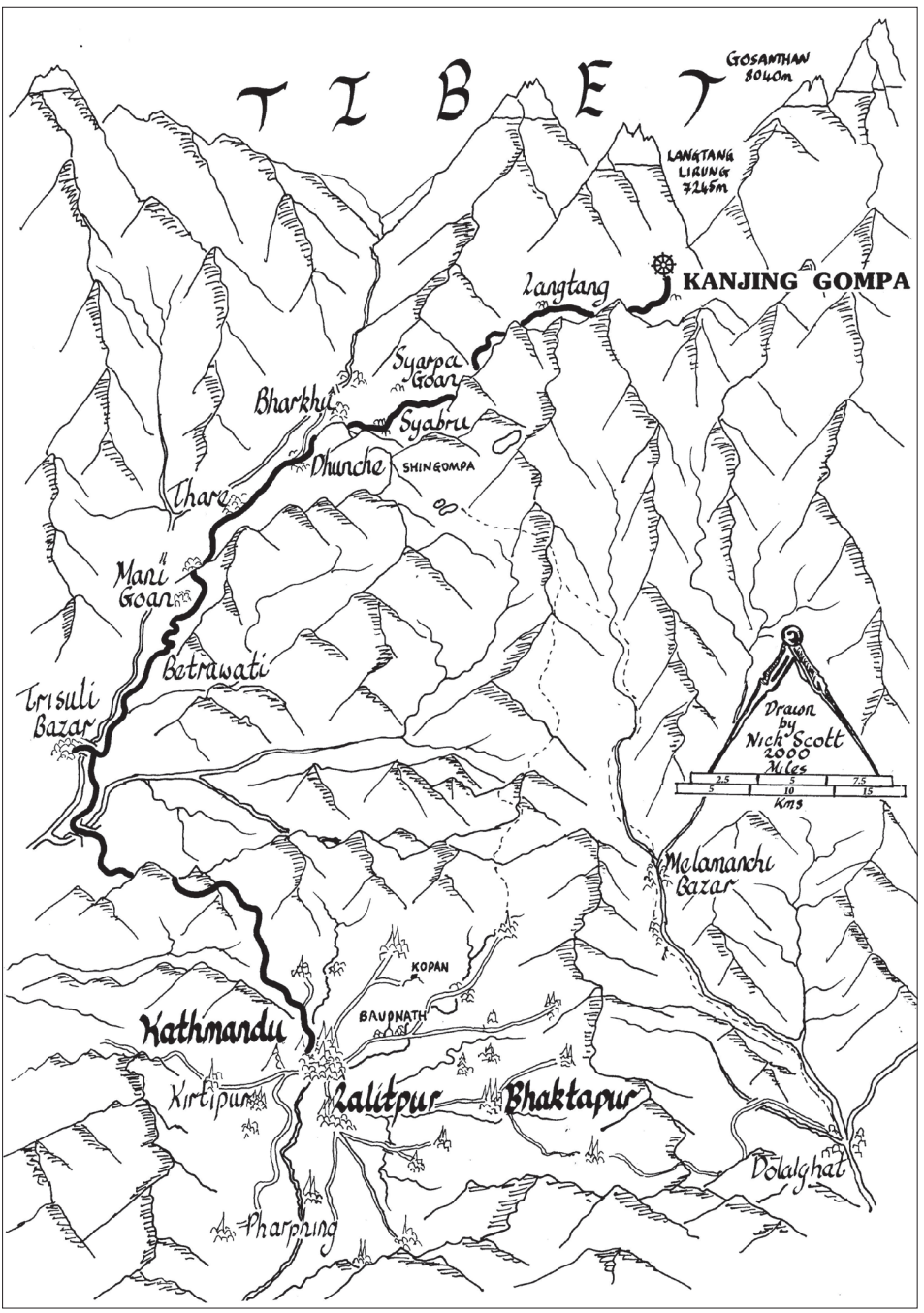
And at the top—I made it to the top without stopping—was the great shrine, with Buddhas smiling gently through the mist of my flickering attention and calming the pounding of my heart. Buddhas of all the directions, *vajra* thunderbolts, prayer wheels…. But I hardly remember even that consummate impression. Homage to them, always; but no, it wasn't even for the Buddhas, this long haul.

One of the milling throng of tourists, Coke in hand, wanted to take a photograph of me. I laughed. It was all for *him*. Somewhere on the planet, maybe, a man has a photograph of a Theravada monk whose face is spread open in an enormous grin. "Buddhism must make you happy," he thinks. And so it does, so it does. Buddhism does indeed make you happy—at the end of a long stretch from which only images return. Keep that image to inspire and encourage you, friend. For me it's enough to know I have found myself in the mandala. I was there, now I am here. Even if no one can hear this, this closes the circle of the pilgrimage for me. I have come to the end of regret.

The Seventh Moon:

THE MOUNTAINS





The Kathmandu Valley and North to Tibet



27

Bringing It All Back Home

AJAHN SUCITTO

Another circumambulation. The world on top of Swayambhu Hill rotated around the great *stupa*. Its huge white upturned bowl straddled the centre of the paved summit. From each of the four faces at the base of the *stupa*'s spire, pairs of serene blue eyes gazed down on us all. Around that watchful centre, a cosmology in stone and metal danced like stars around a galactic core: shrines, small votive *chaityas*, images of deities and *yakshas*…. From somewhere devotional music was playing, though the circumambulating pilgrims, some shuffling, some ambling, were going along each to their own rhythm. The rubbernecking tourists were more erratic still. Their cameras were inadequate: no matter which way it was approached, it wasn't possible to get a total picture of Swayambhunath. I could take in some, but only a small proportion, of the details: like the human-sized shrines to each of the five *dhyani* buddhas, attendant bodhisattvas, and their tantric consorts, or the fine metal work of the flowers or the features of the guardian deities. But to absorb into and attempt to follow the detail meant losing the rhythm of the whole. When I stepped back to re-establish a whole perspective, some knowing Buddha eye or Tara's smile would fix the attention and

steer my gaze back into myself. To look up meant ascending the gilded spire of finely wrought rings as they diminished in order of size under the canopy of a gilded parasol. Above that, at the ultimate pinnacle of this primordial Buddha, was some detail that my eyes couldn't make out. And beyond that was the sky. It was a relief to come down again to the great white bowl, the mother, out of which the forms arose, and find myself—not by watching, but by participating.

That is surely the intention: to have one take part in this, so that one circumambulates with hand trailing the cool, worn copper prayer wheels that are set in the metal fence around the great white belly. And maybe moved by all this to offer a prayer, or at least attune the heart to the manifestations of this world: the scampering monkeys; the pilgrims, mostly old in ragged dress; monks in Tibetan robes; off to one side in one of the small temples that sit around the *stupa*'s feet, a skein of Nepalis with hand drums and cymbals rocking in their *puja*; and the swirl of crafted forms that seem to be inanimate but keep establishing point and counterpoint. This is as close as one can get to Swayambhu. The great wide eyes look down over all of us as we tumbled beneath them like flakes of glass in a kaleidoscope, eyes with the Nepali figure for "one" descending like a question mark-shaped nose between them. And they gave me a question: how do I bring the meaning of this pilgrimage back home?

We made our way down the hill behind the *stupa* along a winding path to a small *vihara*. The Anandakuti *vihara*, although a modest and prosaic group of buildings, was the seed-point for Theravada Buddhism in Nepal. Established by Venerable Dhammaloka in 1943 (when Buddhism, or at least its vitalised form, was highly disapproved of), the *vihara* was more renowned as the base of Venerable Amritananda, who had passed away the previous year. The current senior incumbent was Venerable Kumar Kasyap, to whom we gave Chhatra Raj's brief note. He was amiable but had little English. There were a couple of novices, a two-storey cell block, a small separate temple, and a refectory. There

didn't seem to be any activity to take part in: the shelves full of books in Kumar Kasyap's room indicated a style based on a Sri Lankan model of private practice centred around study, translation, and writing. We were given a large room upstairs and left alone with the afternoon, a feeling of "now what?" and a scattering of booklets.

Most of them were booklets published by the *vihara* with Venerable Amritananda as author, dealing with conventional aspects of Buddhism and some on the history of Theravada in Nepal. Maybe this would be of use. So I began the process of whiling away time in the valley in accumulating bits of history that I could then measure against the living background.

What was never explicitly stated but was apparent to the observer was that the ancient indigenous tradition of Buddhism long ago ceased to be Buddhism in anything other than name. Comments on the remarkable degree of harmony between Buddhism and Hinduism in Nepal have to be offset by the fact that to all intents and purposes they are two forms of the same religion. Newari Buddhism has no animal sacrifice; and there are generally Buddhas somewhere on the elaborate Newari shrines. Otherwise it would be hard, based on the nature of its practices, to see it as other than one of the many Hindu sects. The Newars, who were originally mostly Buddhist, have steadily had the influence of Buddhism as a teaching or a culture withdrawn from them since Buddhism disappeared in India in the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. The Hindu Malla kings enforced a stratification of the society on brahminical "caste" lines, and the Gurkha invasion of the late eighteenth century imposed even greater emphasis on Vedic norms, making their own Indian dialect the official language of the kingdom. Then when the Rana prime ministers took over, religion was held firmly under state control, and any teaching that might arouse new interest, as well as conversion from one religion to another, was made illegal.

So Theravada began in an almost undercover revolutionary way with aspirants sneaking off to India for ordination and being thrown into jail

or exiled on returning to Nepal. But with the push to be part of the international community after the fall of the Ranas, Nepal had to open up; and in that climate it was the missionary zeal of, above all, Ven. Amritananda, that seeded Theravada Buddhism, with its emphasis on ethics, inquiry, and realisation through one's own efforts. Hence Theravada here had a proselytising slant.

In Britain, Theravada has always kept a low, at times almost non-existent, profile. I had always attributed that to traditional reclusive modesty. Actually it was probably as much to do with the national ethic that regards enthusiasm as slightly vulgar and religious crusades as definitely suspect. It isn't that way for the lay Buddhist in Asia: hours of drumming and dancing accompany religious occasions in Sri Lanka; Young Buddhist Associations in Malaysia and Singapore talk of "missionary work" and churn out pamphlets and magazines by the cart loads. More oriented towards fun, Thai religious festivals are frequently accompanied by rockets, shows, and dousing people in water, while the television stations host noted bhikkhus who give the teachings, often in a way that directly points to the moral failings of the society's leaders. The idea of Buddhism being a mode of static onlooking is very much a Western fabrication. But in the morning after our arrival, when Venerable Bhikkhu Maitri introduced himself and began arranging newspaper interviews and venues for our teaching engagements in the valley, all this was a novelty for me.

It was normal for him. He was still a relatively young monk but had been broadcasting Dhamma on the national radio within the first few years of his ordination in Sri Lanka. He had left Sri Lanka after four years as a bhikkhu, and on returning to Kathmandu, he had begun setting up his own training centre for *samaneras*. Currently he had ten boy pupils—the laity had blocked his attempts to set up something for nuns—but he was optimistically making plans for up to thirty-five more. Apart from managing the centre on his own, he taught the secular and religious curriculum of Pali, Sanskrit, and English, as well as having a slot on the

national TV network. He had heard of our arrival and had come over to Anandakuti *vihara* to warmly invite us to his centre and generally facilitate our tour of the Buddhist circuit. Our week-long circumambulation of the valley looked like it would entail active participation.

So Nick and I packed our bags and walked down the hill to the east, over the Bagmati River that runs north-south along Kathmandu's western boundary and into the city. We arrived at Bhikkhu Maitri's place, Sangharam, in good time for the meal. It was a cramped house with a courtyard and young *samaneras* scuttling hither and thither. They were already making a room ready for us, the largest and most secluded space in the establishment; Bhikkhu Maitri was cheerfully getting things up and running. He of course had arrived hours ago, having taken a taxi from the gates of the *vihara*.

I had resolved to immerse myself in the humanity of it all and let that inform the situation—but that took a bit of doing, on all fronts. Just in terms of Theravada Buddhism there were about sixteen active *viharas* and Dhamma centres, several of which were already aware of our arrival, and with Bhikkhu Maitri and Chini plugged into the network, a steady succession of invitations started manifesting. Meanwhile Nick took on the duties of applying for visa extensions, changing what money we had left, and juggling that against the maps and the time limit to come up with some plan of action that would be a fitting conclusion to our journey. And I just wanted a peaceful immersion, taking in this…reflecting on that….

There was a lot to take in. The valley is the heart of Newari culture, which, although often mingled with Tibetan, is a dazzling experience in its own right. On our first day in Kathmandu, I did decide to attempt to absorb one small temple, a Buddhist one, the shrine to Seto Machhendranath. It's off Asan Tole, a bustling thoroughfare full of stalls, cars, rickshaws, scooters, people. In fact the market overflows into the courtyard in which the main shrine stands, behind a cluster of steles, *chaityas*, and pillars carved with deities and animals. The reek of butter lamps and

the soft playing of drums and cymbals over the drone of a harmonium wafts and wraps itself around you. Lions and griffins defend the steps to the door of the shrine, while a couple of sinuous Taras waving flowers beam blessings down from their pillars. It didn't feel right to just stand and stare, almost rude; taking my cue from the gentle flow of human activity around the temple, I briefly paid my respect to the shrine and did a few slow circumambulations around the courtyard. Then whatever flashes of the ornate copper roofs, ornamental banners, and images that arose could stay in the mind as they would. That had to be as much of the whole as I could take in.

That seemed to be the only way to go about it. In more than one sense the streets were part of the shrine; the stalls with their cloth, Nepali hats, ribbons, beads, and curios; the cars, bikes, kids asking for "one rupee!" and occasional glimpses of some delighted divinity winking from a recess in a wall; it was all enough and just what it was. Form, feeling, cognition, and the patterns of psychological activity that they bring up in your mind—as well as the very state of consciousness in which they arise: all this is impermanent, say the Awakened ones, and as such you can't find self-existence in any of it. Rather than trying to fix on anything in particular, it felt, not exactly pleasant, but quietly *real,* to immerse myself in all that.

> *Thus you should train yourself: in the seen there will be just the seen, in the heard just the heard, in the sensed just the sensed, in the cognised merely the cognised…then you will not be holding any of this. When you are not holding any of it, you will stop identifying with any of it; then you will be neither the watcher nor the watched, nor somewhere beyond or in between these positions. Just this is the end of dukkha.*

The only difficulty was trying to get my Buddhist practice to be that real. Home base, Sangharam, had its trying moments. The first interview with the local news agency was no big problem—just the let-down

of not being able to communicate, or even be asked about, anything that seemed important to me about our pilgrimage or the Buddha's Dhamma. Newspapers want manageable facts and concepts. Bhikkhu Maitri paid occasional fleeting visits in the midst of managing his many projects (which by then included organising extensions to our visas); so it was frustrating that there was no occasion to get into any talk on Dhamma with him.

Then there were the breakfast scenes: it wasn't just the *samaneras* who didn't seem to know about formally offering food; Nick had also lapsed on some of the formalities over the breakfast platters that they dashed in with and plonked down on the table. He seemed to be somewhere else; I assumed he was too absorbed in maps and plans to connect on that level. For my part I was sticking to my principle of not making request for any food, so I went without whatever he forgot to offer—and rather sullenly "watched my mind." Sometimes it would take me half a day to get over the mornings at Sangharam. They were like breakfast time for the classic dysfunctional family: father grunting monosyllables from behind the newspaper; eldest son involved with his motor-bike; the kids rushing in and out, late for school as usual; and the wife seething—why doesn't somebody ever talk to me! What a life! Everyone's too focused on their own aims and attitudes to relate to each other—or even to themselves. Now and then I could see it as some soap opera—that brought a quiet inner smile. I remembered my mother again. If, I vaguely realised, I could get over my aversion to domestic dysfunctionality. I'd probably have something useful to bring home.

NICK

Kathmandu had lost a lot of its magic since I was first there. But whether that was because of the changes to Kathmandu in the last twenty years or the changes to me, I wouldn't like to say.

I originally heard of Kathmandu on a beach in Sidmouth, in Devon, in

1968. It was during my summer holidays from school, and I was playing at being a drop-out. With a dozen or so other young men, I was sleeping in the shelters by the sea. We subsisted by sharing our meagre amounts of money, supplemented by a bit of shoplifting by some, and by food slipped to us by various girls down on holiday with their parents. The others weren't much older, or more experienced, than me—except that is, for Burn. We all looked up to him. I suppose he was only in his mid-twenties, but to us, he seemed to know it all. He made leather belts and bags and sold them where he could; he had long hair and a beard and a worn, seen-it-all attitude about the world. Sitting on the beach one day, he produced a letter he had received from a friend who had made it to Kathmandu. He said in an off-hand drawl that he thought he might go out and join him that winter. I had little idea where Kathmandu was (we were studying South America for geography at school, not Asia), but I was very impressed. I decided there and then I was going to do that instead of going to university.

When I finally got there, four years later, the place was still full of the likes of Burn, and there was a whole economy that catered to them: cheap cockroach-infested hotels, grilled booths on the streets where you could buy legal hashish, and wonderful "pie shops." Someone must have taught a Nepali how to make such Western delights as lemon meringue pie, apple strudel, and chocolate fudge cake, and there were now several little cafes satisfying the craving, fuelled by hashish, for the sweet things of home. You could spend the day in those pie shops, playing chess, smoking dope, eating sticky cake, and looking out of the first-floor window onto the amazing street below. Kathmandu seemed very magical then.

The pie shops have gone now, you can't get hashish legally any more either, there are lots of cars and lorries where I remember only people, bicycles, and carts, and although the old richly carved buildings in the town centre are still there, they are now surrounded by modern blocks of brick and concrete. The hippies have completely gone too. On this

visit the young Western travellers we saw were all well dressed, and most seemed to be Dutch or German. There was a whole new district that catered to them, with neat hotels, proper restaurants, supermarkets, travel agents, and shops hiring sophisticated equipment for trekking. Cheese, chocolate, and newspapers were on sale, and there were proper bakeries selling bread and cakes. However, the prices were pitched at the new type of visitor and outside our range. Without the Theravadan *viharas* we stayed in and the *danas* that fed us, the amount of money I had left wouldn't have kept us two days in modern Kathmandu.

On our second day we set off for Kopan Monastery, which is outside Kathmandu, to look up Stefano, who had told us in Lumbini that he could be found there. We were after advice. He might know somewhere in the high Himalayas—some small Tibetan *gompa* perhaps?—where we could spend a few days before flying home. This idea was a compromise between Ajahn Sucitto's desire for somewhere quiet where he could meditate and my wish to go walking in the high mountains. Busy, Westernised Kathmandu had been a shock, and we both wanted to dally in something more pleasant before we had to return to the responsibilities of home. So we had agreed to spend our last ten days trekking up to a mountain retreat where he could meditate and I could go for walks.

We went via Baudhanath, or Bodhnath, which is the other major Buddhist *stupa* in the valley, on the other side of Kathmandu from Swayambu, and slightly farther away. We rode part way on the trolley bus (something else I do not remember from before) and arrived in drizzling rain. The Baudhanath *stupa* is not on a hill but is otherwise much the same as the one at Swayambunath, a whitewashed dome topped by another smaller one with the two eyes looking out at the world and then a golden spire. But at Baudhanath there were far more Tibetans. There was a continuous line of them trudging around it, turning prayer wheels while they mumbled a *mantra* or chatted to a companion.

I remembered walking to Kopan Monastery from Baudhanath previously, and I blithely reckoned I could remember the way. But, of course,

when we set out I found that I was wrong. Not only did I get lost and have to ask directions several times, it was also much, much, farther than I had remembered. And it was raining. The paths underfoot were muddy and slippery, and although we had some protection we still got very wet.

I must have been that way quite often, though. I recalled returning at night across those fields by torch light. I was with an English girl called Zara. I remember that, because I gave her a lift on the back of my bicycle from Baudanath, and we rode into Kathmandu singing "The Owl and the Pussycat"—and I fell for her completely. This time things like that were not going to happen. Life is unromantic with a monk as a companion. More like a fourteen-year-old marriage. He wasn't upset about the long trudge in the rain—of course it was farther than I had anticipated, and much more work, but wasn't it always?

Eventually we did find Kopan. It was on its own small craggy hill rising out of the paddy fields. We climbed the back path and arrived out-of-breath and very wet amidst a collection of Tibetan monastic buildings perched on the small amount of flat land on the top. There would have been good views had it not been raining. Instead the buildings were so completely enveloped in damp cloud that we couldn't even see *them* properly. There was no sign of Stefano either, so we retired to a small tea shop to recover and take stock.

Kopan Monastery was important in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism to the West. The central lama at Kopan in the 1970s, Lama Yeshe, and his main disciple, Lama Zopa, adapted the traditional academic tradition of the Tibetan Gelug school to make the teachings more accessible to Westerners. They taught short meditation courses, and gave initiations and teachings as discrete courses of lectures, so that Westerners passing through Kathmandu could come and try something just for a week. Most Tibetan centres that have been established in the West have followed the Kopan model, with the emphasis on providing graduated courses for lay Buddhists, rather than the long training for a monk to become a *geshe* or preist.

Monasticism, of a sort, was still going strong at Kopan, though. The tea shop was being run by boisterous young Tibetan monks. When we arrived they were caught up in an argument. One of them was sitting on the counter and shouting at the other behind it. But it was good humoured, and they were friendly and open with us. We asked, in simple English, after Stefano. They shook their heads. They thought he had gone away for a few weeks. So we sat and drank some black coffee as our clothes dried, and I started to wonder what to do now. Perhaps we could look around the buildings and possibly meet some of the community? We had glimpsed two Western monks as we arrived, but they had taken little notice of us. Perhaps we should go and introduce ourselves? I tried suggesting that to Ajahn Sucitto, but he felt that we should be starting back if we were to get to Kathmandu by dark. He seemed ill at ease, wanting to get away. I supposed that he was unhappy with the un-monklike behaviour of the young novices, or perhaps it was his awkwardness in social situations he is unfamiliar with. So we did not look around Kopan Monastery, or get to meet anyone there who could give us advice. Instead we left straight from the cafe, trudging down the main drive in the rain. I was disappointed and annoyed and trudged along behind him in silence. Just like a married couple after a row.

My sense that we should have stayed to get advice was proved wrong nearly immediately. We had gone only a few hundred yards when a brand new four-wheel-drive station wagon pulled up and offered us a lift, and it was the driver of the lift who provided the advice we were after. She was Italian-American, working for an international aid organisation in Kathmandu. She had a keen interest in Tibetan Buddhism and had just been visiting Kopan. Ajahn Sucitto, who sat in the front, came out of his shell in response to her questions, and they chatted all the way back into town and then through the city to Sangharam, where she dropped us outside the gates. And it was she who advised us to go to Kanjing Gompa in Langtang, a high valley on the Tibetan border due north of Kathmandu, for our retreat. She also suggested we take

with us a letter of permission and that to get this we should go back to Baudhanath, as Kanjing Gompa came under the jurisdiction of one of the Tibetan monasteries there.

So there was another evening at Sangharam and next morning another disorderly breakfast plonked down in front of us by the young Theravadan novices of Sangharam. I must admit that I was just enjoying the opportunity to have lots of toast, with butter, marmalade, tahini, jam, tea, *and* coffee. While I realised that the breakfasts were disturbing Ajahn Sucitto, I thought he was upset by the novices' behaviour, not my lack of offering things. Of course, he didn't tell me what I was doing wrong and I didn't ask—old couples get like that.

Next time at Baudhanath we went behind the old buildings that surround the *stupa*, to where I remembered paddy fields but where there were now new concrete buildings. The Tibetans have done well for themselves in Nepal: the modern buildings were all owned by them, and several were luxurious new monasteries. We had been told to ask for the "Bhutan" monastery under the guidance of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. That was a name we knew well. He was the high lama who had been leading the ceremony we had been swept up into in Bodh Gaya: the large man with flowing grey hair and a real presence to him who had then led the chanting from a high seat in front of the shrine. Later on the pilgrimage, at Lumbini, we had been told that it was he who was responsible for the small *gompa* there too. Then again at the monastery in Pharping, our first stop in the Kathmandu Valley, the monks had said that Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was also their teacher. He was the most senior lama in the old Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, and he had been responsible for establishing all these monasteries. Things were beginning to click into place—it felt as if we were meant to go to Kanjing Gompa and that Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche was going to have something special to do with it.

It took a while to find the "Bhutan" monastery, as it was behind the others: a brand new set of buildings, set in landscaped grounds and

more resembling the executive headquarters of a successful company than a monastic community—that is, if it were not for the bright new Tibetan-style paintwork covering the temple. As we entered the gateway, a Western Tibetan nun came scurrying along the pebble driveway towards the temple. She was English and told us, in a slightly breathless voice and with a broad Lancashire accent, "Aye, Kanjing Gompa is one of ours…Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche is here…if you'd be wanting permission, you'd better come along." Then she scurried off, disappearing into the building, with us following rather like Alice after the white rabbit.

We climbed broad stairs to an upper storey, where we took our sandals off and entered a large shrine room dedicated to Guru Padmasambhava. People were beginning to congregate: there was the Lancastrian nun and a few other Westerners, all of them with white silk scarves in their hands ready for presentation to the lama. Several Tibetan monks were coming and going, and there was an air of something important about to happen. I settled down expectantly—it might take a while, but you couldn't expect this kind of thing to happen instantly. After only ten minutes waiting, Ajahn Sucitto—my other more-doubting half who had been reluctant about the whole enterprise from the beginning—leant over to point out that it was now nearing eleven and perhaps we should find somewhere to eat.

So we left the *gompa,* for a meal of noodles in a mundane snack bar round the corner, and when we returned the audience was over. The Westerners had gone, as had most of the Tibetans, and the only likely source of help was an important-looking young lama—well fed and wearing impeccable robes—whom we had seen inside. He was now outside the entrance speaking to two junior monks. By the time Ajahn Sucitto had agreed we should go over and ask him about Kanjing Gompa, a BMW had pulled up. The lama stepped in, the sun catching the gold watch on his wrist as he opened the passenger door, which was then closed by one of the junior monks. The BMW swept away down the gravel drive, leaving us standing in its wake. The remaining monks

did not speak English when we tried asking them, so we gave up and returned to Kathmandu. Ours was going to be a purely Theravadan pilgrimage into the mountains, completely devoid of miracles.

AJAHN SUCITTO

After a couple of days snatched in Kathmandu, we made our way over to Venerable Nyanapurnika's *vihara*, out east towards the airport. He'd been waiting three hours for us when we finally arrived (Nick was getting some clothes made, the tailor was sorry, the distance was longer, the bus didn't come, we couldn't find the address—and so on). But it was O.K. with Venerable Nyanapurnika. He was a meditator, trained in Burma in that system where every bodily movement is done excruciatingly slowly and mentally noted—quite an asset when life actually operates at that pace. His novices took at least ten times longer than Bhikkhu Maitri to bow to me. The slightly frozen mood that it left was quickly dispelled by Venerable Nyanapurnika, who welcomed us with great good humour. One of his arms was in a sling; he wryly explained while waving it that breaking a finger was conducive to mindfulness.

After our conversation, he left us to meditate. Tomorrow we were to fulfil our invitation to Chini's house in Patan for the meal: she was a close associate of his and everything had been arranged. I noted rather wistfully how tranquil the *vihara* was.

Chini was excited. She had been to Britain ten years ago, spending two years in the Burmese *vihara* in Birmingham and even visiting Chithurst briefly. She was a great one for connections and had been pulling strings all over the valley since our arrival. Her cousin, Sujeev, had visited us at Sangharam and was to interview us for a Buddhist magazine. But his interest was also personal and growing, especially as he started helping out with the practicalities of getting around and listening to our talks. Pictures of another of her associates, Sister Medhanandi, stood where we had our meal: one of her as a lay woman working for the U.N.,

wearing a flower print dress and all wreathed in smiles, then one of her as a nun in Burma, half in shadows, but composed and reflective with downcast gaze, shaved head, and simple pale pink robe. The two images caused a mental note. Yes images; they last a long time, and can capture much more than a few words. And as we were in Patan, where the best Buddha images are made, we could use the last scraps of money that Nick could spare to bring something evocative back home

So Sujeev took us to a couple of the small workshops where Buddhas are made. These were Buddhas in the raw, not polished and packaged but dull bronze, standing in untidy throngs or sitting on any shelving space available. Some were nearly life-size, most smaller than that. One place had the aristocrats: gold Buddhas with silver robes all carefully engraved with flowers. Way beyond our means. But we found a couple of copper beauties, about twenty centimetres tall, one to give to the bhikkhu *sangha*, and one to the nuns. Then from somewhere among the dull brown throng, a face, a gentle and calm face, caught my eye, and I knew that one was for me. It was Amoghasiddhi, the imperturbable, whose *mudra* symbolises the action of Buddhas in the world. He fitted into my hand. And alongside him—the craftsman fumbled along the shelf—was Akshobya, and here was Ratnasambhava…Did he have the others? Wait a minute…over here was Amitabha, and somewhere behind here…Vairocana. All five *dhyani* Buddhas. We had toyed with the idea of buying me a warm sleeping bag for the mountains, but now there was no doubt. They had to come with us.The man took them off to be polished, and they came back gleaming. So the last of the money went on seven Buddhas. That meant abandoning the sleeping bag, but this was a pilgrimage and priorities were priorities. The certainty was luminous: images to take us out of the images of thought.

Beautifully also for that time, we were like children again, my old much-abused trail buddy and I. We laughed, we sparkled, we were surrounded by Buddhas. It was like that moment by the forest trail near Rajgir, or swapping yarns by a fire under the full moon overlooking the

River Son, or the countless times propped up opposite me around some tea in a *chai* shop. What else was a pilgrimage about but to be in the vortices and flow of spiritual friendship?

And of course we span apart before long among the temples of Patan. I dipped into the Mahabuddha temple (extraordinary, wonderful, etc.) glanced briefly at one of the four "Ashokan" *stupas*, goggled unabashedly at the fabulously carved royal bath (more like an artificial pond with mother goddesses, Shiva aspects, Hanuman, and the Buddha, all peering down onto where the Malla kings of old had lolled with their loofahs), and lingered in Durbar Square. Patan, Kathmandu, and Bhaktapur had been rival city states for a period of the valley's history, so each Malla princeling had obviously set out to outdo the others in terms of splendid artefacts in their main squares. In that golden age, Newari architects even went to China and introduced the pagoda to the Ming emperors. Now I can hardly remember which square was which. They all seemed to have the basic ingredients of ornate temples and palaces, with the local monarch immortalised kneeling on top of a pillar reverentially facing the temple of his choice. I think it was the one in Patan whose dignity was slightly offset for me by having the statue of a bird sitting on his head. At the time it was created, it probably meant something auspicious.

None of this was working for Nick. He seemed a bit "out of it" in the valley, his mind drifting off and tugging away, not wanting to be there, not able to empathise. He reached the end of his interest at the Golden Temple and left me there enrapt by some small Tara shrine in a courtyard. He sat outside and then went back to the Ahkeshwara *vihara* where we were staying the night. It seemed to epitomise the way in which it was difficult to sustain a common sense of direction. I sat there on my own, with a harmonium and *tabla* drums somewhere playing a sacred song. Harmony. I was still expecting harmony on the wrong level—the real thing, the deep practice, allowed you to flow along in a world of discord.

NICK

Our roles were reversed in the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley: I would prefer to stroll along the streets just taking in the ambience of the place, while Ajahn Sucitto would become completely engrossed in the detail of the old buildings and shrines. It was the equivalent for him of what a fabulous bird reserve was for me. He loved it all and he would try to share his interest. He had pored over the guide books we had found, and he already knew about the different architectural influences, what the buildings were, and who the chap carved in stone on the pedestal in Lalitpur was—King Sid something-or-other. He became totally engrossed when we got into the Golden Temple. The inside was incredibly ornate and he tried to tell me what various bits represented—"those are the eight Matrayas, or whatevers, and these are *nagas*." I did try to act interested, I really did, but my mind would glaze over in the same way it does within ten minutes of being in a museum. I told myself that if the building had been beautiful I could enjoy that, but not all this symbolism. All I wanted to do was sit outside and listen to the devotional singing—that was beautiful.

At the time I knew nothing about Vajrayana Buddhism or about tantric practices, so I had little context in which to put all these details he found so fascinating. And I haven't got his interest in the mind and its manifestations. I expect I was not as tolerant as he had been with me, but I do remember standing in the street several times patiently waiting for him while he was looking at something or other, reminding myself how patient he had been.

What did interest me was the social context of the Theravada movement, and so I read a lot about the Newars. That helped me see the nationalistic aspect of what they were doing. During this century the Newars have responded to their loss of status in their own valley by promoting all things Newar. There is a movement that encourages publication in the Newar language and that organises demonstrations around issues seen as Newar—like the adoption of the traditional date for their

founding of the Kathmandu Valley as the start of the national calendar. Part of this movement is the promotion of Buddhism, and so the movement was the reason for all the different Buddhist organisations we were giving talks to. The adoption of Theravada Buddhism is also part of this movement. With their own Vajrayana Buddhism losing out to Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism, they needed to revitalise it in a way that kept it identified with the Newars.

Having since read also about their old traditions, I can look back on some of the things we saw with renewed insight. Those strange tall old houses set about a courtyard where we had the *danas* were in fact the old monasteries, with a *chaitya,* an ornate *stupa*, in the centre of the courtyard and shrines in each house. We did not see the shrines, but then the books tell me that Newar houses are laid out with the private part of the house, including the tantric shrine on the first floor, at the rear. As a visitor, access to different parts of the house depends on your caste, and for us to have been taken to the second floor and fed there meant we were being honoured as high caste. I had wondered why we always had to make our way up all those rickety stairs, bent double under the low ceilings. The way we all sat when we ate, with all the men in a line against a long wall, the oldest at the head, and nearest us, strictly followed their seniority within the caste.

There were a lot of those meals. Our stay in the valley seemed to be a long series of fabulous *danas*. We even accepted invites to breakfast so that we could fit all the offers to feed us in. To begin with, I wolfed the food down, taking delight in it all; after living on meagre rations for so long I really appreciated rich food. Slowly, however, with the never-ending supply of mouth-watering dishes, combined with the lack of exercise, even I became blasé. I began to desire more simple fare. Finally, while we were at the Akheshwara *vihara*, I asked to be excused from a *dana* so I could stay behind and eat plain rice and *dhal* instead.

It was while I was alone at the Akheshwara that I met a young Englishman from the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) who

was helping run their meditation courses for Western tourists. Their history has meant relations with the monastic order in England can be a bit strained, but he was interested in coming to Ajahn Sucitto's next talk. I hoped that when Ajahn Sucitto came back I could introduce them and make a nice connection. But Ajahn Sucitto returned tired, and although I made the introductions and did try to draw Ajahn Sucitto into the conversation, there was that awkwardness that he can sometimes show, and it didn't work.

I was left to ponder on another reversal of our roles in Nepal. In India it had been me who had been reluctant to get into conversations with people. Being asked the same question over and again left me cold—while Ajahn Sucitto wanted to respond to their concern. Now when we were meeting Westerners, it tended to be me wanting to talk and Ajahn Sucitto who was holding back. He found it hard to talk inconsequentially, just as a way of connecting.

At the talk that evening there was no one from the FWBO—just one Theravadan monk, half a dozen pink and very attentive nuns, and some twenty Nepali lay people. The talk was well received again, and there were lots of questions afterwards—some of which I, as usual, barged in and answered. A harmonium player we had met earlier at the Golden Temple presented a vest he had made for Ajahn Sucitto, and there was also an excited Chini. She insisted that both of us, with Sujeev, must come back to her mother's house for an evening drink with cheese and dark chocolate. There were also more invites for *dana* after the talk, and I began to wonder if we were ever going to get away from the valley and away from being stuffed with good food. I was beginning to feel like one of a pair of porkers being prepared for Christmas.

AJAHN SUCITTO

The visit to Dharmakirti, the nunnery in Kathmandu, was a special event in my mind: I wanted to see if there were anything I could bring

back to the nuns in Britain. The night before, April 12th, we had both given talks at Akheshwara *vihara*, and afterwards Chini delighted in introducing us to her old mother. I was glad to be able to give her some attention. Things went well. Sujeev said he'd be round at 6:30 A.M. to get us to the nunnery by 7:00. And he was.

The position of women in Theravadan monasticism is a contentious issue, with a good amount of heat exchanged over the relatively low status afforded to nuns. The Buddha himself had, according to the texts, not been that keen on creating a nuns' *(bhikkhuni)* order, but having been persuaded to do so on the undeniable grounds that women had the capacity for liberation, along with a certain amount of emotional pressure (the first applicant was his foster-mother), he did so on certain conditions. These conditions basically meant that the bhikkhuni *sangha* was junior to the bhikkhu *sangha*, and the bhikkhu *sangha* was required to give their consent to each candidate before she could be admitted into the order.

The tides of history scattered the dependent bhikkhuni *sangha* more radically than the bhikkhu *sangha*, and at one time their order nearly died out, only surviving through a branch that had established itself in China. Now orthodox Theravada casts aspersions on the validity of that lineage—after all it was in a Mahayana country. They have a point: most Mahayana bhikkhunis practise with compromises—adaptations if you like—of the Vinaya that the Theravadins take literally. Anyway, whether through this or through the weight of the tradition, or because of male prejudice, there is a resistance to re-establishing a Theravada bhikkhuni *sangha*. Nevertheless, Thai women go forth by the thousand as white-robed *maechees,* living under the eight precepts, enjoying a lesser status in the society, having less material support, and carrying fewer projections. It's hard to say how much of a disadvantage that is in terms of realising *nibbana*. But still it's not what the Buddha set up. Meanwhile the *maechees* get on with their practice in the range of ways that the bhikkhus do: teaching, studying, social work, and meditation.

How do I fit into this? Seven hundred nuns (mostly temporary) sponsored my ordination. They were right behind me, literally, as I walked through the temple door. Seven years later, I was given the responsibility of developing and implementing a training for the group of nuns who had gone forth under Ajahn Sumedho. So that meant that I spent the next seven years trying to set up something stable in this cross-over of cultures, which would suit Westerners and not clash with the Asian tradition. It also meant that, as their advisor, I had to listen to the nuns. That shifted a lot of things for me. I thought I had monasticism figured out until then. Then I started to see things differently, feel tides of emotion and my resistance to them; and realised that I needed to take the Dhamma-Vinaya deeper than my slant on doing and being—to go on pilgrimage into very strange lands in fact.

On the surface, the visit to Dharmakirti was nothing much. Things seemed a bit scattered at first. About twenty-five lay people turned up, and I gave a talk, which was not translated; about six nuns attended, but none of them spoke English. Somehow or the other, the session started getting very lively and extended long past my talk with everyone looking happy and the nuns getting animated. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Then the senior nun, Sister Dhammavati, showed up, a square-built no-nonsense type with a bit of English. She had walked from Kathmandu to Burma for her ordination and had spent seven years there. We couldn't get anything more than that communicated verbally, but she looked pleased in a gruff kind of way. She showed me some photos of their Dhamma work, pictures of them wading across rivers on parochial duties, teaching children, and giving Dhamma talks. I wanted to say something but didn't have the words. Then they gathered together and presented me with a Buddha image, and somehow we all went off to a *dana* in the house of one of the nuns' sisters.

Even from my bemused position, there was something pleasantly different about the nuns' group. They were a group. It was unusual to see any other *vihara* with more than one or two bhikkhus in it. Even the

Sanghanayaka, ninety-two years old and evidently on the way out, was attended by a nun. Venerable Pragyananda had lit up to see us. I wondered where his bhikkhus were. But it was the same story throughout. Call it responding to the requests of the laity if you like, but mostly, as soon as they had some basic foundations, the younger bhikkhus were off doing their own thing—which didn't seem to entail participating in any other bhikkhu's project. For me this was strange, because there was a strong amount of group activity and mutual support in the monasteries I was familiar with. But then I realised that all these were Ajahn Chah's monasteries, and that feature of collective practice and mutual support was one of the hallmarks of his training. Bhikkhus often resisted it, wanting to go off on their own, but he was direct enough and compassionate enough to hold it all together. People talk about the non-specific nature of Ajahn Chah's meditation practice, but in context it was all there. Once when asked what his technique was, Ajahn Chah said: "Frustration. I frustrate my disciples"—and smiled. You couldn't get off on your own and hide your stuff.

> *Whatever samanas and brahmins have said that freedom from being something comes about through some state of existence, none of them, I say, are free from the tendency to identify. And whatever samanas and brahmins have said that escape from being something comes about through avoiding existence, none of them, I say, have escaped from the tendency to identify. This dukkha arises dependent on holding on. When you let go, there is no more suffering.*

With the Dharmakirti sisters it must have been much the same. Places and situations for nuns were fewer than for the bhikkhus, so they had to be with each other and get along. Thirteen of them came to the *dana*, including one ten-year old who was requiring encouragement and even some physical assistance from her elder sisters to hurry up and get her meal down before noon. Basic training. And it reminded me of the practical difficulty of establishing a contemporary nuns' *sangha*: you

need to have someone with you to get the training down. *"If there is no senior teacher among the bhikkhunis who is experienced, trained, skilled, who has attained liberation…then the holy life is not perfected."* Meanwhile they were doing the best they could, and I wished them well. We parted after some benevolent but unintelligible exchanges. The unknowing left a good space for the heart. It was good to connect to that—and not have to figure it out.

NICK

According to Nepali legend all mountains once had wings and flew about the world as they liked. However, the god of rain wanted to bring water to the people of Nepal, so he cut the wings from the mountains, the mountains fell to earth, and the wings became clouds. On the night of the new moon, which we spent on Swayambhunath, I was in the kind of state where that tale seemed as likely an explanation as any for the world that surrounded us. Swayambhunath seemed the centre of a *mandala* encircled by the twinkling lights of the valley, then the dark jagged outline of the surrounding tall hills and beyond that the distant mountains with their wings of clouds. The stars turned slowly about the *stupa*'s spire, and I sat transfixed under a tree looking up at it all and out at that world. It was a great night. One of the few on the pilgrimage on which I had no trouble staying awake, but in another reversal of roles, it was Ajahn Sucitto who was in the dull stupor, caused by all the talking he had been doing, and when we met up not long after midnight, he suggested we give in early and return to the Anandakuti.

Next morning was Sunday and we were at Ven. Nyanapurnika's old *vihara* in Lalitpur for his weekly Buddhist service. After that and another *dana* we went to the bus station to take an extremely crowded bus to the third of Nepal's old cities, Bhaktapur. We rode there through the paddy fields of the valley. It would have been a nice journey—if we could have seen out of the window.

These days Bhaktapur is the city with the least Buddhist influence. Perhaps that was always the case. And perhaps that is why the small *vihara* we stayed in was not based in one of the old "monasteries" but in a simpler old building. Venerable Dharmashana had been trained in Thailand, and it showed in the impeccable outer form of the monastery—everything was so tidy, and the courtyard was laid out with neat beds of flowers—and in the way everything was done in just the right way when receiving Ajahn Sucitto. It was a nice place to stay, for both of us. We did not have to do too much, as there are few Buddhists in Bhaktapur, and Ven. Dharmashana was so attentive to us. When he found that Ajahn Sucitto was interested in temples and architecture, we were taken on a tour, including the principal Hindu temple down by the river.

I can't remember which god the temple was dedicated to, but I did enjoy the video we watched later at Ven. Dharmashana's mother's house. It showed the temple and the big annual Bisket festival they have in Bhaktapur. The festival had finished the day we arrived, and there were still the remnants (lots of litter and the occasional dazed drunk) in the streets. The video showed a great wooden structure towering over the crowds it was being towed through. There was some god atop it. I forget which one, and why he had to be moved, but it was very impressive.

We spent one night at the *vihara*, staying until the meal the next day. Then in the afternoon Ven. Dharmashana took us down to the bus station. But he wouldn't hear of us going back to Kathmandu on the roof of a bus, which to us seemed the obvious solution (the bus about to leave was again crammed with humanity); instead he insisted on paying for us to squeeze into a taxi, which to me already looked full. So the view we had this time was reduced to a close up of six other human beings instead of a bus load. But it got us there, depositing us outside the Kathmandu GPO mid-way through the afternoon.

The main post office in a capital city is used by travellers as a collection point for letters. When we were there e-mails had not taken

over and "Poste Restante Kathmandu" was still one of the most common traveller addresses in the world. A whole room was set aside for the waiting letters, set out in a dozen large flat boxes on a big table, the contents sorted by alphabet, each letter indicated by protruding cardboard partitions. We joined the dozen Westerners already leafing their way through the tight wodge of letters, aerogrammes, and postcards, with personal notes inserted for friends. It was actually a mistake to use somewhere like Kathmandu as a poste restante. They got too many such letters and didn't have the resources to deal with them properly. There were so many letters that one could easily miss one if it has been misfiled, which was often the case. As well as S, we looked under A for Ajahn, V for Venerable, N for Nick, and D for Dr., and then Ajahn Sucitto, having been shocked by the number of letters for others he had found in the wrong place, decided he wanted to look through the rest for good measure. While he was doing that—I reckoned it would take him at least an hour—I went in search of my parcel.

This was the parcel I had sent to myself from Bhairawa, just before Lumbini, at the start of the pilgrimage. It contained the excess clothing I had bought in New Delhi—all those items I should never have got and then justified by sending them here. It included warm clothing we could use for the trip into the mountains. After a long wait I was told that recorded deliveries were the responsibility of a clerk who was away for a few days. He would not be back until we were on our way into the mountains. So much for the warm jacket, woollen hat, and blanket. Still I consoled myself that I could collect the parcel just before we flew home and have the things to use there. I hadn't let go of them yet.

Meanwhile Ajahn Sucitto had got to V in the boxes of letters but had found no more addressed to us—though he had done a lot of re-sorting for others. I left him to go through W, X, Y, and Z, as I had to do some shopping for our departure the next day for the mountains.

Kathmandu is an amazing juxtaposition of cultures. There are buildings and lifestyles spanning centuries separated by a few yards; golden-

domed temples, air-conditioned hotels, and ancient wooden houses jostle to line the streets. In the old part of town, where I went to collect a shirt I had arranged to have made from thick cloth, the streets were crowded with Nepalese wearing traditional clothes, beggars thrusting a cut-off limb at you, and the occasional cow pushing its way through everyone. There the shops are still clustered according to the commodities they sell: brass, copper, and aluminium cooking vessels; quilts and blankets; or beads and jewellery. The inside of each shop is tiny and invariably full of people. In the street where fabrics are sold, saris and lengths of cotton cloth fluttered outside in a slight breeze like giant colourful butterflies.

From there I crossed through the more modern part of town—where the traffic is at its most chaotic, the air filled with noise and petrol fumes—to the more sedate Thamel, where the influence of the tourists is at its greatest. There were the trekking shops where I wanted to hire down jackets and a good sleeping bag for me—Bhikkhu Maitri having already loaned one to Ajahn Sucitto.

The money I was using came from the occasional small donation that lay Buddhists had offered during our stay in the valley. We would have received more if we had ever mentioned how poor we were, but that had not felt right. The only person who realised how little we had was Sujeev, and only on the last morning. He then insisted on helping with the cost of the hire of the coats—though he could ill afford it himself. As it was I calculated I had just enough left for the bus fare into the mountains and the simple meals of rice and *dhal* I expected to be able to buy along the trail. We planned to leave the next afternoon and stay the night at the Theravadan *vihara* in Trisuli, then take the bus to Dhunche and the start of the walk. Ajahn Sucitto had double-checked my estimate that we could walk to Kanjing Gompa in three days to make sure he would still have five days to spend meditating at the *gompa*.

The shopping made me late for the talk the two of us were supposed to be giving at another vihara that evening. Ajahn Sucitto was nearly

half way through his part, about "Buddhism in Britain," their favourite topic. He was sitting on a chair at the front of an audience of some thirty mostly young educated men. I had only just got my breath back by the time I had to come forward to speak on "Buddhism and Ecology." I tried to be optimistic, pointing out that although Nepal was a poor and overcrowded country, I had been struck by the sanity of the people and felt they had the ability to take the problems of their own country in hand. I spoke of the need to think locally, praising the recent moves to transfer the devastated areas of woodland from government to local village control—so that it will be in the people's interest to protect them. I always am optimistic when I speak in public; not that I feel that optimistic myself, it just feels better to encourage people.

AJAHN SUCITTO

That talk at Buddhavihara was the last public occasion for us in the valley. That sense of making an offering in response to the many acts of kindness that these warm-hearted people had shown us, and the enthusiastic response that it met with, were a fitting way to leave Kathmandu. We had completed the scrambled circumambulation. All we had to do now was walk across the city to Sangharam, but that was not so straightforward. Getting away from Buddhavihara was difficult; particularly as a journalist who had come late wanted to catch up on the action with an impromptu interview. I was tired after the long day's activities, and it was Sujeev who tried extricating us from the situation by inviting us to come to a bar for some coffee. But the movement didn't shake the newshound. He tagged right along asking questions, mostly not to the point, as we navigated erratically through the backstreets. The coffee only seemed to fire him up even more, and did nothing for my patience. Then suddenly as we plunged off into the maze of downtown Kathmandu, there was a blackout; there was a huge fire glowing over in the distance and the sirens and horns of emergency vehicles were adding to

the chaos. In the darkness it was difficult to see where we were going, then the lights of a car would be coming towards us, and we would have to scatter and dodge to avoid it. But the reporter was keen; he stayed right with me, asking questions about Buddhism as we jogged along. Where was this going to end? Eventually I was throwing him answers that were getting more and more curt and direct about the need to base Buddhism on awareness in the present moment—which was in darkness and sirens and flashing headlights; danger and irritation and trying to talk sense. Then something came home: it was always like that. Wanting to get away from 'chaos'—in other words anything that deviated from my own attitudes, interests and responses—was the real problem. But the world was always going to be other than my attitudes and responses. And with great humour, the struggling stopped, and that endless journey through so many people found its own centre.

Why Buddhism? Why are you a bhikkhu? Listen, none of this has to make sense. It's more like being a dice in a cup than a deliberate circumambulation. We get thrown around until we come out. And you never know what number you'll be until you hit the ground.



28

Up, Down, Over, and Out

AJAHN SUCITTO

Chomp chomp.

I could feel the precious week we had set aside for a quiet time in the mountains getting nibbled away…but there was nothing else to do but to go with it. All the bhikkhus we had met in the Kathmandu Valley were coming together for a *dana* at Sangharam on our day of departure. It was their way of saying good-bye. So that meant missing the early-morning bus out of Kathmandu, and therefore not getting to the mountains until the next day…but what else can you do?

So it wasn't until the afternoon that we were finally heading for those immaculate mountains. We could see them more clearly as we rose out of the haze of the valley, but the buses had to work hard even to get close. Progress was accompanied by their panting and screeching: the roads were like corkscrews. A hard beginning, like we'd never get there.

The first night, April 16th, we stopped in Trisuli Bazaar; there was a *vihara* and a Theravadan enclave full of Sakyas and Bajracaryas beaming to see us. So then that meant staying for the meal; they were good people…it was the least we could do. So it wasn't until the evening of the 17th that we got to Dhunche, the entrance to Langtang National Park,

which is centred around the Langtang Valley as it snakes north and then east parallel to the Tibetan border.

Dhunche is a trekkers' village. The buses come and go every day, disgorging Westerners with their huge fluorescent packs who tower over the sun-crinkled old Nepali women and bare-foot porters. It's the porters who carry the packs of the larger expeditions in the traditional wicker baskets that extend way over their heads. They go with the serious mountaineers who have all the gear: cooking equipment, tents, ice picks, and crampons for the ridges and glaciers. The second division of trekkers were carrying their own packs with sleeping bags and cameras, adequate for the trails and accommodation in the many lodges. Nick and I were off the bottom end of the scale. We were nearly flat broke for a start, and it wasn't certain whether there'd be enough money to feed us. Rather than boots, we had decrepit sandals; instead of snug-fitting high tec packs, we had a couple of cloth bags. I'd been re-stitching and adding tags and loops to mine and strengthening the places that took the strain—but it was still basically a shoulder bag. Nick's holdall would have been the laughing-stock of any trekkers' lodge: the main zip had given up, so we pinned its broken mouth more or less shut with huge safety pins; the dog collars riveted to the main body of the bag that held his sleeping mat were coming away, as were the leather handles that he put his arms through to pull the thing onto his back. We used to wind an old belt around the whole arrangement to hold it into some cohesive shape. Not that we had that much to carry: to make things easier we left all but our most fundamental requisites at Sangharam. For me that meant carrying just my bowl, mug, and blanket; razor, toothbrush, and sewing kit; the much-battered yoga mat that Katie had offered in Bodh Gaya, the sleeping bag that Bhikkhu Maitri had loaned me, and a quilted vest; the little red diary; a few Buddha medallions from Nalanda to give away; and only one Buddha *rupa*. Mahakhanti of course.

But still it was hard going. We were sleeping out (the lodges, even if we could have afforded them, were not the right places for a monk) and

getting up stiff and cold. Then we'd start winding up and down the trail for a few hours, with the sun getting fiercer and hot blood and breath pumping like a bellows. Occasionally there would be a stop for water, or for yak-butter tea, a few times a day. The lodges came up every few hours: "Blue Star," "Lama Hotel," "Everest View." We'd stop in one of those for our meal, with Nick scanning the menu to see what he could afford: the food was Western-style and therefore much more expensive than the rice and *dhal* he'd budgeted for. But we'd brought *tsampa*—roasted barley flour—with us, and we could mix it with free hot water to fill up some of the inner spaces that the trail opened up. We figured that we'd eat on the way up when we really needed it: get by on a tuna-fish sandwich backed up by a mug of *tsampa*. Perhaps we would have to fast while inactive at the gompa. And going down would be easier—we could do it without food if need be.

The proprietors of the lodges were of Tibetan stock and recognised me as some kind of bhikkhu or lama. One of the men gave Nick some sugar; the women would often stand back looking at us and pondering—there was an offer of a free night's lodging that we turned down—or one would show us a small shrine with a candle and an ageing photo of some lama, or maybe it was a lost relative. The medallions dwindled, and the little photo of Ajahn Chah that a bhikkhu sent me in Varanasi found its last resting place.

After the tiny settlement of Syabru, the valley narrows and turns east. There's a long steep hill there, and a section of the trail had collapsed; I had to pick my way over the scree on all fours. Then the long climb went on all afternoon, up to about three thousand metres. The temperature dropped like a stone with the sun, leaving the blessing of a warm bag and stars pulsing through the overhanging trees. My guts had started going bad that morning; that night they went completely. I just about made it out of the bag, sweating and heaving in the cold darkness. The next day there was no going anywhere. It took until mid-morning before I could get up and totter a few hundred metres nearer to a lodge where

we could get hot water. *Tsampa* helped to glue things together a bit, but we just hung out for the day. Yaks and strange cows were grazing on the scraps of upland grass. A little brown bird, a dipper, squatted on one of the grey slabs that squeezed the icy stream, then flung itself into and through the churning torrent and out onto another rock.

Next day we were on again. It got easier, little by little. First staggering on willpower amongst pink rhododendrons, bamboo, and conifers, with everything dripping with moss, and the breath sobbing like an exhausted child's; then after *tsampa,* with no hope of getting anywhere, the valley opened. We were in an alpine world, nearly treeless, with clear light and sparkling waters, and the hard climbing was over.

The trail went on: azaleas, thorns, mountain grasses, and small irises in their first spring bloom on the warmer north side of the valley, a few conifers on the south face. After Langtang village, it was rock smeared with rust and mustard-coloured lichens and whatever tiny plants can live in the scraps of soil that lodges amongst them. We were both quite spaced out by then; Nick lost his treasured binoculars and hardly seemed bothered about looking for them. But by the evening of April 20th we still hadn't arrived at Kanjing Gompa. Fortunately we were offered shelter in an outlying farm house. The yaks were underneath, the air like a razor.

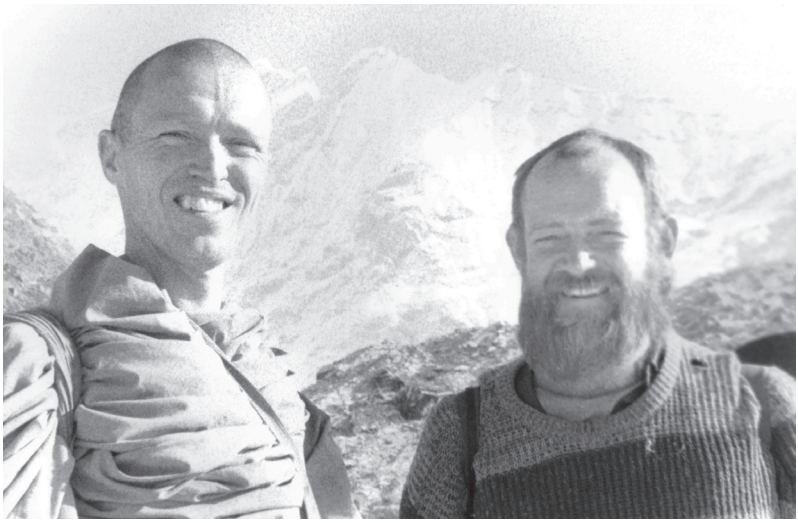
The interior was basically one large main room, with a couple of wooden plank beds, and a fire in one corner under a small hole in the roof. Fronds of juniper were hanging drying on the walls, dry yak dung in cakes by the smoky hearth; old rugs and a blanket lay on the floor. Apart from the two of us, given the places by the walls, there were another three men. The mother was dead, and a young girl wandered in and out of the gloom a few times before spending the night somewhere else. Grandfather was coughing in a corner, he went on all night; father was drunk but harmless; and the son who had invited us off the trail was keeping things together. There wasn't a lot to keep together: one of his brothers had a small lodge farther up the trail; the other was a monk. The rest of the family got by on potatoes and yak by-products,

supplemented by renting a room to a schoolteacher who'd come from the Terai. It was mostly a matter of enduring and keeping some faith.

The room filled up with smoke, but we had to keep the wooden slats that served as windows closed to preserve warmth. The old man was very sick, with one of those coughs that slowly wring a body out, like the sound a car engine makes when the battery can barely turn it over. If compassion has a sound, this is it. What could I do but be there and feel it? Eventually I lay down and lifted the slat by my head a couple of fingers' breadths to breathe by, then wriggled down to peer into the night. A cold half moon glared over the rock-strewn valley. The peaks, their flanks glowing with snow, were very close now, holding the black starshot sky like a canopy over this fragile but tenacious life. Even sleep was fragile: there was none for the old man; and it could only sink me to the level where I could drift and let go into the smoke and the coughing.

Morning *puja* was an offering of juniper to the fire; with the flaring, an aromatic smoke was released to carry the mumbled string of prayers up through the hole in the roof. We left after some *tsampa*. It was Nick's turn to crumble today, and so the going was very slow, through frozen snow that was just melting as we gradually climbed higher. Even at a snail's pace he had to keep stopping. Which was fine by me: at this altitude, too much activity brought chest pains, and by this time the idea of getting anywhere just made things worse.

Every now and then there were mounds like walls in the middle of the track; walls that were up to twenty-five yards long, five feet high, and three feet thick, made out of large tiles of rock, their broad flat faces turned out towards passers-by. These walls would be made of three or more tiers of these tiles, with a "mortar" of smaller rocks and shales in between each layer. The faces of the tiles were engraved in Tibetan script with mantras, symbols, and prayers, and often a bamboo pole with ragged prayer flags on it stood nearby. Local people on the trail passed them keeping them on their right side, sometimes adding a small rock to the heap on top as they moved their lips.



Before the Langtang Himal.

When the mountains' jaws are this close, prayer seems a natural activity; I found myself falling into it. Why not? To be a pink bag of sensitive jelly surrounded by such absolutes of severity breeds awe; offering seems a natural response, with thoughts, sounds, and rocks the readily available forms of *puja*. So I would sit on the rocks with the glare closing my eyes, turning mantras in my mind until Nick came shuffling up and sank down beside me.

Then picture Kanjing Gompa set back from the main trail and above it. The trail led past a trekkers' lodge and another building, then came to an end. The white mountains closed in on all sides, dazzling; beyond them, over the high ridge, was Tibet. There was no more going on. We'd arrived. But the *gompa* was locked. The nun in the nearby shelter pointed down at the lodge and said "Rinpoche": and when I turned my attention that way I could hear the banging of drums interspersed with a cymbal clashing. So we sat there for a while waiting for a thought.

We'd passed backpackers on the lower stretches of the trail, mostly with a mumbled greeting. A couple of times when we sat at a lodge for tea, there were a few who were in the existential wandering mode, and

they would come over for a brief chat. We met one Canadian guy, Neil, several times; on an indefinite world tour, he didn't know where he was going either.

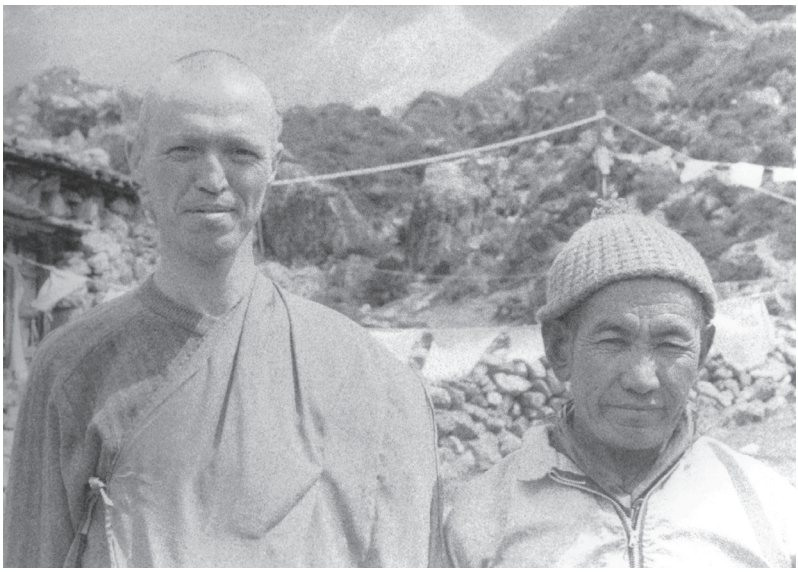
Well, he turned up at Kanjing Gompa, and a FWBO woman from London. The lodge below was a very worldly scene, and she was looking for a quiet place to meditate. But the lodge was the only thing that was happening, and Neil got things moving by inviting us down to "Yeti Lodge" for a meal.

So there was a human world for the peaks to look down on. After the meal, behind the room for sleeping, eating, and hanging out in, the commotion was still going on, so I nudged my way in. It was the kitchen. Rinpoche was sitting on a raised seat with a drum to one side of him that he could beat by pulling a string that connected to a stick. The cymbals were on the other. With a great grin, he beckoned us in and indicated that I should sit by the drum.

It was a dreadful racket—obviously some kind of blessing. The proprietor, kneeling in front of Rinpoche, spoke enough English and, in the first brief intermission when buttered tea came round by the pot, gave a brief explanation and relayed our request to Rinpoche to stay in the *gompa*. None of this had much immediate effect, so it was just a case of sitting it out. The trail ended there, as so many times, in the pit of frustration.

After another hour of drumming, chanting, and clashing, the next intermission produced the information that the *gompa* was *always* locked. My mind started falling apart; but the celebrations continued, and my eardrums remained intact. Memories of Vaishali fuelled my resolve, and there was nowhere else to go anyway.

By the third hour or so, things were starting to develop. A tray laden with carved spires of coloured yak butter was presented, then handfuls of rice grains thrown around, followed by a tray from which meat and butter were also sent to the four directions with a lot of crashing and drum rolls while in the background it was business as usual, with a



Ajahn Sucitto with the Tibetan lama.

woman cooking food for the clientele in the other room, some of whom had also crammed into the small kitchen to watch the show. Then the next level of offerings was reached: the owner stood up with a knife with a big wodge of butter on its tip, called out a phrase, and raised the knife towards the rafters; then another man did the same with a tray laden with lumps of meat and butter. Rice grains came round again to be received with heavy percussion and again strewn in all directions. Everyone seemed to be having fun, so I joined in by hurling rice around. That was obviously the right thing to do, because among much satisfied grinning and smiles, Rinpoche came to a halt and began packing up his gear to make a departure.

But what about a place to stay? Nick, pragmatic as usual, was piping up before I could stop him, using the Tibetan word for bhikkhu. "My companion is a monk…a *gelong*! He can't stay here. Not right, *gelong* sleep with women! We are pilgrims, come to meditate!"

We all bundled out of the butter-strewn kitchen, with Rinpoche strid-

ing up the hill at quite a pace, but he turned his head back towards us with a slight tilt—and a big grin. So Nick and I galloped after him—as best we could at five thousand metres altitude.

Rinpoche's room in the shelter beside the gompa was like the cockpit of an airplane, with photographs, *malas*, and religious images instead of dials and gauges. He had a book of photographs, too, with pictures of the Dalai Lama escaping from Tibet across the mountains with some companions. "Dalai Lama" was the only phrase we had in common. Somehow, through pointing at himself and the mountains and the photographs, we concluded to our own satisfaction that he too had made his way over the ridges after the Chinese invasion.

But the *gompa* was still locked. Waggling his hand around in front of the key hole and pointing down the valley with the word "lama" seemed to indicate that the keys were held by a more senior monk in Langtang, or beyond. But there was the covered porch, which was enclosed and used as a store for wood and yak dung. That would do. Rinpoche set to, vigorously sweeping the floor and then bringing armfuls of quilts and blankets over from his shelter, finally returning with an oil lamp made out of an old ink bottle and a giant flask of buttered tea. It was late Sunday afternoon; the slow rate of walking meant that we'd have to leave on Wednesday. The week's retreat had been nibbled down to three nights, but we'd found our quiet place in the mountains at last.

Of course, good old Nick had to invite the FWBO woman to join us for meditation; but we sat in silence for an hour or so. And after she'd gone, I went outside to continue meditating into the night. It was the half-moon vigil, and I sat with the sleeping bag and blankets wrapped around me. At midnight, the mountains swallowed the moon.

In the night and the early mornings the peaks seemed subtly alive, softly shaped by moonshadow, or turning luscious tints of pale guava and orange before the sun turned them hard white. There was my meditation, facing south from the *gompa*, feeling that it was still possible to attune to that stillness, be brought alive by it…the mind, willing and in

love with attention, left everything else alone, snuggled right up to it (only the eyes would sometimes have a flirtatious peek at the dawn), and poised in the silence of its own awareness. Is that the silence of the mountains? Have you heard that sound of silence—like the sound of starlight falling on snow? And then felt that slight teetering, as something wants to know, to grasp…isn't that what it's like when you feel you're getting close?

But the peaks never take you when you want them to. And then it seems like they're slipping away. It's like this…I'd even made it very clear to Nick the way it was going to be, next morning: "If you go down to the lodge and anyone is interested and wants to see me, don't bring them up here! Arrange a time, and I'll come down to see them!" That was the last desperate attempt to get hold of the silence and gulp it down. Then came the sinking feeling as a voice (Australian) slid through the wooden lattice of our retreat "Hey! You guys meditating? Can I come and *sit* with you?" It wasn't that I was going to bite off a big chunk of silence…no, the pilgrim's way is about getting turned around. And getting swallowed. I made an attempt to fend him off: "We'll be having a *puja* each evening, you'll be welcome to join us then." "Gee that's great, and I'll join you now if that's all right."

And then the nice FWBO woman came back, and the Australian brought his friend, and Neil turned up, and we talked on Dhamma and meditation for a couple of hours…and then they brought food for us to eat, even some lovely cheese brought by the FWBO lady, with an air of slight embarrassment, from the other building in the valley, which turned out to be a cheese factory. And that's the way it was…I could be on my own before the morning *puja* and after the evening, with the wonderful mountains; and in between those times there would be talk on Dhamma, and people bringing food, and the Rinpoche happily trotting over with an enormous flask of tea twice a day. A Tibetan businessman even turned up and invited us down to his shop for a blessing. It was all very joyful and just the way it was. So I found myself becoming the act-

The hermit who circumambulated us



ing abbot of a small *vihara*, basically the same role I'd been in when I left Britain; but now I could be the silence within that. Yes, there was a lot more of being chewed to go through yet, but that was all right.

There was a ragged old man who lived in the mountains. Three times a day he'd come round with his prayer wheel going and circumambulate the *gompa* intoning *Om mani padme hum* or generally *Om mani padme*, because his breath would give out. Every morning and every evening, we would be standing or sitting with him slowly making his way around us, reciting his *mantra*. One evening he brought us warm potatoes in an old can. We gave him tea. At first he couldn't believe that the entire mug was for him, then as it dawned on him, he, holding the mug like it was the Holy Grail, slowly drank it down as one long draught. Then he came out with his *mantra* complete and joyous as a trumpet fanfare: '*Om mane padme HUM! Om mane padme HUM!*' And it dawned on me slowly, and with a growing sense of being turned inside out, that *we* were being cir-

cumambulated; that the old man and the huge human pilgrimage in all its rags and tatters was turning around and blessing us.

So what can you do to follow that? On the last evening I tracked him down to his dwelling—it was just a nook underneath a fallen boulder with a woven rattan wall to keep the wind out—and crawled in with a *mala* and a *mantra*. There, in the smoke from the juniper fire that warmed and tarred everything under that rock, we sat and chanted *Om mani padme hum* for a long while. "Homage to the jewel in the lotus!" Praise to the mystery at wisdom's heart, and to everything it brings forth. Or just "Homage!" Nothing else makes sense when you're in the mountains.

Wednesday, April 24th. With Neil in tow, we started making our way down, thinking again we knew where we were going. By mid-morning we'd reached the farmhouse again, and on impulse stopped by. The son was more subdued. Grandfather had just died; crossed over to the next valley.

Life: hard and long when it's working you over; then sweet and so short, like the flash of light on a breaking wave—so much what we are that we can barely see it, then so utterly gone. And where are we going? Look, it's like this….

I did some chanting, Nick knew the last few lines and joined in; the son stood listening. Then it stopped. We stood together in the morning sun for a while, and the silence was there among us. Then we said goodbye and went on down the track.

And that's the way it is.

NICK

We had left early; ours were the first footsteps in the snow that had appeared overnight. Snow covered the tops of the rocks but not the sides, and the contrast everywhere of brilliant white horizontals and lichen-grey verticals was magical. Neil thought it made a great back-



Neil's photo as we sent off back down the mountains.

drop for a photograph, so we stopped briefly and posed for him, beside a pile of snow-dusted prayer stones with the white peaks of the Himalayas behind.

It was pleasant walking, we were well rested, it was downhill, and we had given ourselves, for once, more time than we needed—more than three days to do two days' walking. We walked along chatting to Neil, making our way through the valley. We passed the Tibetan villages and the people working in the fields, stopping just before the open valley came to an end at a Tibetan lodge, where Neil bought us a meal.

After that the path dropped steeply through forest, and as we made our way down, we had time to stop and admire the rhododendrons coming into bloom, the cascading water of the streams crossing our path, and the soft green light cast by the forest canopy. We had decided to sleep outside that night somewhere in the forest, and by late afternoon

we had reached a break in the steep descent I had spotted on the map. Neil's sleeping bag was not up to a night outside, so we agreed to meet him in two days' time to catch the bus together to Kathmandu.

Clouds had begun to build up again that afternoon, and although rain and snow were unusual in that season, it seemed best to hunt around for some shelter. I found a cave higher up the valley side formed by two massive boulders propped against each other. It was some thirty feet deep, much of it more than high enough for us to walk around in, and there were several flat terraces to sleep on. As I went back down for Ajahn Sucitto and our packs, I felt a few rain-drops, and by the time we had climbed up again, it was raining properly. I lit a fire inside the cave to boil water, and then we sat in the entrance sipping tea and looking out at the rain. It was now falling heavily, bouncing off the leaves and ground and running in rivulets down the hillside. Inside, dry and warm, we felt like our fortunes had turned; instead of the frustrations and hardships of the last six months, things were going our way.

By morning we had grown fond of our cave, and we decided to stay on a few hours. How we used that free time reflected the difference between the two of us that seems to me the most relevant to this story: not that between the "ox and the dragon," or the "monk and the scientist," but between the "ascetic and the sensualist." Just two more labels no more true than the others but still labels that are pointing at something. When these two characters walk the spiritual path, they do it in such apparently different ways. Ajahn Sucitto opted to spend the time sitting in meditation in the cave, while I, of course, climbed up and sat atop one of the two boulders. This was so large that its front jutted out from the forest canopy that clothed the mountain side, and from it I had a view of the whole valley. Everywhere were trees, most of them conifers, and the recent rain had left them all glistening in the morning sun. Tiny droplets of water hung from the pine needles beside me, and I sat in silence, delighting in it all. My mind had emptied, leaving a sense of vastness and awe and no feeling of a boundary between me and the

world about me. It felt very profound, and I sat like that for two hours or more drinking from that spiritual well that I had been a long time in re-finding, until Ajahn Sucitto called, and I had to go down to pack up our things and set off down the valley.

That afternoon as we carried on through the forest, my mind again went quiet, leaving only the sense of walking and a feeling of being at one with what we were passing through: the beauty of the nature all around, the shafts of sunlight on the path ahead, the feeling of my feet hitting the ground and no perception of anyone at all doing it. During that long magical afternoon there also came the realisation, bubbling up from somewhere, that it was experiences such as these that I had been missing for most of the last six months. That is why it now felt so like a thirst-quenching draught. The relentless impingement of India and the difficulty and frustration of what we had taken on had driven away much experience of the sublime.

It felt like the experiences of stillness and oneness when they first came for me with the practice of meditation. Then the contrast between the mind tense with trying, then finally letting go and relaxing into the quietness also enhanced the sense of depth and profundity. For me it first happened after a year or so of meditation courses. I had been sitting under a tree sipping herb tea in a break in a meditation course in Somerset. I was looking at nothing in particular when everything took on this shimmering sense of suchness, something I had experienced before on LSD, a oneness and a timelessness to each moment. Of course once it had passed I wanted it back, and that was to be the way for years afterwards. At the end of some meditation sessions—perhaps for the last ten or fifteen minutes of three hours—the same experience would happen, and then after the gong I would wander off into the garden to be delighted by the beauty of the flowers or the trees. And, of course, the next time I sat I would be trying to work out how to make it happen again, "last time I just dropped the shoulder slightly like this…," spending the whole meditation course caught up in seeking it, and suffering if it did not come.

No one spoke of experiences like that in the Goenka tradition—we were supposed to be diligently watching our sensations, not playing games with emptiness. So eventually I went off to a Zen monastery and then sat on a course taught by Ajahn Sumedho. He put it all into perspective, telling me not to make much of what was happening, not to indulge such experiences, but instead to use the awareness to enquire into my own true nature. I did try, but really, being a true sensualist, I was still delighting in it.

With time that experience became more familiar and so less profound, more ordinary, something that came and went in my daily meditation. It would also happen at times when I was relaxed and amongst nature—especially when walking. So I had come to think I was not seeking it anymore—that was until the pilgrimage and the nearly complete absence of tranquillity and any sense of oneness. I spent much of the pilgrimage with a slight sense of dis-ease, because deep down I wanted those states of mind, and it was only now, as I came down from the mountains, that I could see that. It had taken me ten years to finally see what Ajahn Sumedho had been warning me against. And I saw that the focus of practice now had to be understanding and resolving my conditioning. It was the conditioning that was the problem; the transcendent could take care of itself.

That realisation was very powerful, but it came, was acknowledged, and passed just as the other perceptions of the afternoon did: the beauty of a waterfall we crossed beneath or the deep blue of the sky between the high wooded valley sides. From the perspective of centred-ness there was no regret, and no need to dwell on it. That was just the way it was.

That whole walk down from the *gompa* was quite magical. There was a sense of release—*we had done it*—and that there was nothing left to do. We had time on our hands, and we could wander down through the mountains enjoying the scenery. The forest was incredibly beautiful. The mixture of conifers and a few oaks, all dripping with long strands of lichens, at the top of the valley gave way to deciduous trees with the

light through their leaves dappling the path ahead. The last four days seemed to have brought the flowers out—the delicate white flowers of mountain strawberries, big tufts of yellow-green spurge, blue iris by the water—or maybe it was just that I was now more attentive.

We slept out another two nights and ate another meal at a Tibetan lodge. We wandered along with that sense of ease and well-being that going downhill, or cycling with a strong wind at your back, brings. Nothing was a problem. Not that one of Ajahn Sucitto's sandals giving out would have been a problem to him anyway. On the first day there was the flapping noise that had previously always come from me—he took no notice. On the second, the whole front of the sandal broke off, and he had to walk on with his socked foot protruding—he did point it out, but it was plainly of little consequence to him. What was different was that it did not matter to me, either.

And on the way down we chatted occasionally in that relaxed kind of way one does when something is over. I remember particularly a stop we made by the river. Ajahn Sucitto suggested we do an hour's meditation, so we set up a small shrine of rocks with our wonky Mahakhanti Buddha on it and then sat together beside the river. The river was a wide torrent of white water tumbling down the valley over great boulders—spectacular to look at, but when I closed my eyes, I was left with the loud and incessant roar. When the hour was up I commented to Ajahn Sucitto that we might as well have been sitting inside a jumbo jet, as it would have sounded the same with our eyes closed. He was surprised and asked if I had not used the sound as my meditation object. In fact I had—there was no other choice—but that had simply meant that I sat for an hour listening to a loud roaring noise. He was again surprised, commenting that if he did that the sound disappeared within minutes.

We then got into a discussion about our meditation experiences. For Ajahn Sucitto absorption into higher levels of concentration was easy, but it was that same experience of oneness that I described earlier, which was of real import. His tendency was towards absorption or into

abstraction, while mine was to get distracted by sensual delight in the world. Both tendencies took us away from what was really the point but I realised then that Ajahn Sucitto's was a better one to have if you were going to walk through India! And that, I think, was the only time we talked of our own meditation experience on the whole pilgrimage. But then what was the point when our tendencies were so different.

And so we descended. The heat returned and the forest became subtropical, then it was small fields of cultivated terraces and Syabru village. We stopped there for a big plate of noodles as our meal—the cheapest thing on the menu. In the afternoon we wandered on, down through steep tree-covered slopes where we stopped and camped the last night. The final descent was through dense deciduous forest, around a high rock bluff, covered in gnarled rhododendrons, to arrive at Dhunche the morning of the fourth day.

Dhunche had not seemed much when we got there from Kathmandu—just a one-horse town with a row of wooden hotels—but now, after a week in the mountains, it seemed the height of sophistication. Each of the hotels had a veranda facing onto the main street with white plastic tables under umbrellas, where Western travellers sat in groups, chatting over coffee, or eating scrumptious-looking breakfasts. We, however, had to make do with a small tea stall. I left Ajahn Sucitto drinking a tea—all I could afford—while I went to buy the bus tickets. I looked enviously at the other Westerners enjoying their meals as I walked down the street to the small hut with a sign announcing the bus to Kathmandu.

Inside the hut was an old Nepali man sitting on a stool against a shelf with a pile of bus tickets and a money box. When I asked for two tickets to Kathmandu, he looked up and, to my surprise, said, "One man paid. For English *gelong*. With you, yes?" Bemused, I answered yes, and he handed over the ticket that had been waiting beside the money box. It must have been Neil, who having got there earlier than expected had gone on to Kathmandu and left a ticket for Ajahn Sucitto. It was a great

gesture, and to celebrate it we spent the money on a proper English-style breakfast. We sat on one of those verandas enjoying scrambled eggs, toast, butter, marmalade, and tea—two pots for Ajahn Sucitto.

Then the bus journey. I spent the first part of it sitting amongst the luggage on the roof, from where I had a spectacular view down the valley and up to the distant white mountain tops as the bus wound its way down the dirt road that switched back and forth across the steep hillsides. These lower inner valleys had been cleared completely of forest; the hillsides were terraced with long green paddy fields winding round them. The bus stopped at each small hamlet to let more Nepalese on, and soon the inside was full, and they began to join me on the roof. By late morning, when the bus eventually came down to the valley bottom, there were more than thirty of us up there, wedged between bits of luggage and hanging on as the bus swayed along.

At Trisuli Bazaar, most of the locals got off to do their weekly shopping, and I took the opportunity to get a seat inside. I wanted to be back next to my companion, even if it were squashed and unpleasant inside, with no fabulous view. I had this wave of affection for him when sitting on the roof, and I wanted to do the last part of the journey beside him. He was my *kalyanamitta*, my spiritual friend. And I don't think the scholars are right when they argue, as Ajahn Sucitto explained after Kushinagar way back at the beginning of the pilgrimage, that when the Buddha said that *kalyanamitta* was all of the spiritual life it was just a play on words. I think the Buddha meant exactly that. After all where would we be with out them? How would we ever get started, how would we keep it up for a life time, if there were not well-knowing spiritual friends doing it with us? We don't choose them like other friends; we just get given them. And they can be so different from ourselves, sometimes exasperatingly so. Like Ajahn Sucitto. But had I done the pilgrimage with someone like me, I would have learnt little and let nothing go. As it was the pilgrimage turned out to be the most important single thing I have done in my spiritual life, and I suspect it was like that for him, too.

Maybe the importance of spiritual friends is more obvious to those of us inclined to the sensual. Ascetics seem to think they can do it on their own, perhaps because their sense of despair makes them think they have to. But a sensualist knows he can't. He knows that if it were left to him, he would be sitting on a hillside eating an ice cream and enjoying the view. It is something that is somehow done to him, despite that—something that has to involve other people. And that is also why the pilgrimage, and this book, turned out to be about two people struggling to do something together rather than about what we actually achieved. And why to this day there is no one for whom I have as much affection for as the man who was sitting beside me on that bus.

The bus filled with other passengers and then left town on the tarmac road that climbed up and over the pass to the Kathmandu Valley. Two hours later we were in Kathmandu on our way to Sangharam to pick up our things. From there we took a trolley bus to Ven. Nyanapurnika's temple, in the new part of town beside the dual carriageway to the airport.

The next day was our last in Nepal. I spent the morning in town returning equipment we had hired or loaned for our trip to the mountains. I also made one last visit to the GPO seeking the parcel of clothes bought in New Dehli, but I was told that it had been "sent back to sender." The parcel clerk, now back at work, told me that it was "here for more than the allowed three months" and that he had returned it "just the other day." So much for all the things I was to take back to England. I had to let them go after all; and when I finally did, it was a relief. I even felt a wave of joy for whichever Nepalis got them.

I should have given them away at the beginning, as my companion surely would have done. But it can be so hard for me to let go of the physical realm. At least his apparent disdain for the world and interest instead in abstraction and absorption come from seeing clearly that wanting things from the world leads to disappointment. I was still deluded that somehow I could, if I adjusted this and changed that, get it worked out and be finally satisfied.

But really both tendencies are wrong; neither indulging in the world nor dismissing it are the answer. Where are you going? It is not where so much as how. We have to find the Buddha's middle way, somewhere half way between the two, where pleasures can be enjoyed (and difficulties accepted) with neither desire or aversion.

Back in Kathmandu that afternoon Ajahn Sucitto gave one last talk—at Ven. Nyanapurnika's other temple in the old part of Patan. Then Ven. Nyanapurnika insisted on paying for a taxi to the airport, and in no time we were on the evening flight to New Delhi. It took off in the dark with the moon up, so that the shapes of the high mountains were just discernible as we banked and turned to head south. In no time the plane had passed over the Mahabharat Lekhs and the other foothills we had climbed through, and we were flying high over the Ganges Plain. The ground was dotted with a million faint lights, like a night sky seen through a powerful telescope. Here and there, the multitude of pinpricks coalesced into constellations, which were the towns, or strange swirling galaxies, which were cities, but it was the sheer density of the little lights in the darker areas that was the most impressive. They represented the hundreds of millions of people who lived on the plain, all those people of whom we had seen such a small fraction. I was deeply moved by that last sight of the plain we had struggled across for all those months. I felt immensely fond of it, and all the people who lived there, as I looked down from above. Then we were descending towards New Delhi airport.

The night of the flight was *Wan Phra*, the night of our usual full-moon meditation vigil, and we found ourselves parked in the transit lounge of New Delhi airport for the night. It being India, the lounge was crowded with other passengers, most of them crumpled in heaps on the benches or strewn on the floors trying to get some sleep. From around the lounge several young children took it in turns to cry. All these people and the lack of ventilation made it hot and stuffy. I tried to find a way out so that we could spend the night on a roof, but each of the exits was guarded

by airport personnel who insisted that we were only to be allowed out when our flight was due to leave. So we were stuck there till dawn. We were also both extremely tired from the previous day's travelling.

I assumed, under the circumstances, Ajahn Sucitto would skip this full-moon sitting, but I should have known better. Despite everything, he was going to fulfil our original determination. While I had been looking for a way out, he had found some floor space between a partition and a bench with an Indian family encamped on it, and there he had set up our small shrine and a place for the two of us to sit. When I returned he was settling himself down to sit up for the night. I no longer had it in me even to try; I just lay down and fell straight asleep beside him. And I don't think he even noticed—he was so tired himself that his head was already slowly slumping forward then being jerked back as I closed my eyes.

The Air India jumbo jet took off just before dawn. I had realised even before our pilgrimage started that the timing of this flight and the fact that we were flying west and so following the sun would mean that the whole twelve-hour flight would be technically during the period from dawn until midday, when Buddhist monks, and their lay companions on eight precepts, could eat. That thought had often sustained me during the periods of real deprivation we went through on the pilgrimage—I would think of all the difficulties being over and sitting on the flight home eating all those lovely airline meals. So here we finally were, and sitting in the two seats by the central exit, opposite the galley from where the trolley loads of dinners would emerge.

With the breakfast I managed to restrain myself and only asked for two extra portions of bread, marmalade, and tea. During the second meal, however, the effect of the fantasies and all those months of going without took hold. When I finished my foil-packaged meal on its plastic tray, I could not help but notice that other people were sending back parts of theirs untouched—the trolley would park right in front of me. So I asked if I could have some of the rejected portions of the main course. Then I started taking some of the sweets and salads left over.

Eventually the air hostess offered me a whole extra meal. Even after that I was still raiding the returning trolley for the small packets of cheese and biscuits and asking for more fruit juice. Ajahn Sucitto said that the poor Indian stewardess looked like a small frightened bird with a large and insatiable cuckoo chick in its nest.

I only realised that I was never going to be satisfied, no matter how much I ate, when the trolley disappeared for the last time. By then the plane had started its slow descent to Heathrow, and I put the thought of food aside to look out of the window as we crossed the English Channel and the long curving line of the Kent coast. It was a clear day, and we could see the green fields and small towns of south-east England way below us. Then the plane was turning over London in the queue of planes waiting to land and, as at the beginning of the pilgrimage, the fake detachment of soaring above it all gave us one last chance to contemplate what it was that we were returning to: England, home, monasteries, family…. Well I tried, but I was now feeling too nauseous from all the food I had eaten. As we wheeled slowly down, banking at each turn so that the streets of London appeared laid out below us in the window, each of the turns made me feel even more queasy. Then, when with a thud of wheels we were finally down, and there was that slow turning and then the clank of the stairs connecting to the hull. I felt so stuffed that it was painful just walking down the steps and through the airport. I didn't ever want to see food again.

In England, however, it was still morning. Even after the long flight, the landing and the time taken to pass the cold stares of custom officers and immigration, because of the turning of the planet we came out into the arrivals lounge with one hour still to go before midday. And there waiting for us was quite a group from the monastery: monks, nuns, and anagarikas, with dishes of food and special treats like English chocolates, in case we hadn't eaten enough on the flight. Ajahn Sucitto was visibly moved by the sight of so many of his fellow *samanas* there to meet him, and he graciously accepted some of their offerings. For

me though, just the sight of more food was too much. I sat down next to him, surrounded by all these welcoming faces and their kind gesture, and felt sick. There was that sensation so familiar from the pilgrimage, that sinking feeling, of having blown it again.

I was well and truly down from the mountains, and from that other, transcendent, reality. Back in *samsara,* the cycle of birth and death—the cycle fuelled by my greed, hatred, and delusion. Had anything really changed? The pilgrimage was over, we were back where we began, and I just felt humbled by the difficulty of it all and how poorly I had managed.

But something, somewhere, had changed. Maybe it wasn't at the front of my mind then, but somewhere there was now the knowing that it is here that I have to work it all out. For it is here that *nirvana* is, not some other place that I had striven for. I just had to work at the illusion.

Notes

Preface

Through the goodness that arises from my practice… A translation (see chap. 19) of a dedication used in Thai monasteries for devotional purposes. The original Pali version is of recent coinage.

Chapter 15: Home Again

The Calcutta book by Geoffrey Moorhouse (Penguin, 1971) is a wonderful introduction to India and Indian ways as well as a good guide to the city. The Ambassador car has been joined by a variety of modern vehicles on Indian roads following a decision by the government the same year we were there to allow foriegn carmakers to set up factories in India. But the Hindustan Motors Ambassador is still made and widely purchased because of its simplicity and robustness.

Chapter 16: Monks, Saints, and Sages

Thomas Jost died in September 2000 from dengue fever caught during a personal retreat in a monastery in Burma. In a moving tribute in the Gaia House Newsletter, Christopher Titmus referred to him as a "living saint." He told how in 1991 following the retreat we were on in Bodh Gaya, Thomas and Christopher established the Prajner Vihar School for the children of the very poor. Thomas then managed that school of 380 pupils, as well as other projects around Bodh Gaya, while still organising Christopher's annual retreat. Christopher quoted from a letter Thomas had written from that hut in Burma on his meditation experiences: "Out of stillness manifests the capacity to respond in accordance with the inexpressible Dharma. All my wrestling with distracted thoughts ends again and again in the unequivocal embrace of the futility of the search. It's rather joyful and awesome." Christopher had been hoping that after this retreat Thomas would finally agree to start teaching meditation with him.

Several books have been published by Christopher Titmuss (see bibliography). For an example of the teaching of Andrew Cohen see his *Autobiography of an Awakening* (1992),

and for the other side of the story there are two books by disillusioned followers, Van der Braak 2003 and Tarle 1997. The second one is by his mother! Even saints can fall; in recent years there has been controversy for Christopher Titmus, too. He was asked to stop teaching at some meditation centres because he had too many relationships with female disciples.

The talk given by Ajahn Sucitto in Bodh Gaya is sadly no longer available now that the wonderful Amaravati Cassetes service has been replaced by the modern but more limted www.dhammathreads.org, which sends out free CDs. The monastery web sites have talks for downloading (www.cittaviveka.org, www.amaravati.org).

Chapter 17: The Forest Tradition

Delightful are the forests… Dhammapada, verse 99. [Dhp 99]

For a personal account of life as a bhikkhu with Ajahn Chah, see Breiter 1994. Lewis (1991) describes the tribal people from this area. Naipaul (1990) explains that the Naxalites were a Maoist-inspired terrorist movement that began in Bengal in the 1960s. They moved into the countryside trying to inspire peasants to rise up against the landowners.

Chapter 18: A Matter of Survival

Bhikkhus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing… Itivuttaka, "the ones," 6. [It 18]

The very ancient rocks making the hills (also chaps. 17 and 19) date either from the Archean period 400 million years ago or from the Lower or Upper Proterozoic 300 and 200 million years ago, respectively (Muthiah 1987). Soils and land use from Gupta 1980, wildlife from Hawkins 1986, Seshandri 1986, and Sinclair 1987. The television programme on Project Tiger was called *Tiger Crisis* and was first broadcast by the BBC on 2nd January 1994.

Chapter 19: Like a River Flowing

Information on soils from Bose & Gosh 1976 and Gupta 1980. The methods for using the clay soils of the Ganges valley to make bricks and pottery go back thousands of years. Piles of broken cups just like the ones mounting up at tea stalls today were left by the people there before the Aryan invasion. See Moon 1989.

Chapter 20: The Family Business

Being endowed with craft and learning…this is the highest blessing. Sutta Nipata (Mahamangala Sutta), 261. [Sn 261]

"Let us think…" Rig Veda, III, 62, 10.

Therefore hold nothing as dear; for separation from the dear is painful… Dhamapada, verse 211. [Dhp 211]

Yasa's story is in Vinaya, Mahavagga, chap. 1. [Vin i.15]. The irreverent slave girl was Punna, who by the time she uttered the verses, was an enlightened bhikkhuni. Her story is in Therigatha, "sixteen verses," Punna. [Theri 240–43].

Love for our children… and the story of the Buddha's return to Kapilavatthu is in Vinaya, Mahavagga, chap. 1. [Vin i.20]

Historical data was from Winternitz 1927 and Basham 1954. For a more sympathetic portrayal of Varanasi than ours, see Eck 1982.

Chapter 21: The Universal Duty

Give ear, bhikkhus, the deathless is found… and *By practising as you are instructed…* Majjhima Nikaya, Ariyapariyesana Sutta (sutta 25). [M i.172]

There are, bhikkhus, two extremes… and *Have I not already told you that there is separation…* and *And what is the Middle Way?…* Samyutta Nikaya, "the truths," chap. 2, Dhammacakkappavattana sutta. [S v.420]

*Wander for the welfare and happiness of many…*Vinaya, Mahavagga, chap. 1. [Vin i.20]

Reverend Cuthbert's teacher was the (now late) Roshi Kennett of Shasta Abbey, California. Cuthbert himself was killed in a road accident a few years after our return from India. The historical information on Sarnath came from Dutt (1957, 1962) and Dhammika 1992. The recent Indian political history came from Keating's Contemporary Archives 1989–91 and Lewis 1991. Information on the Indian steam trains came from Theroux 1980 and Thomas 1995. For an account of the televised *Ramayana*, see Tully 1992.

As to eyebrows on Theravadan monks, once in England, the Western monks might have stopped. When Ajahn Chah first came to visit, however, one of them, an American who particularly cared about how he looked, asked Ajahn Chah if they could stop. The monk explained that here they were mixing with monks from Burma, Sri Lanka, and other countries…they all had eyebrows…eyebrows had a use, they kept the sweat out of the eyes…the Buddha didn't shave his eyebrows…it was just a Thai cultural tradition. To each of these arguments Ajahn Chah gave one of his grunts. He seemed sympathetic, and the young monk felt he had his teacher's approval. He bowed and made to leave. Just as he was closing the door, Ajahn Chah growled a question at him. "Do you think it will make you more attractive to women?" So they never did stop shaving them.

Chapter 22: Action and Stillness

Tathagatas delight in empty dwelling places. Vinaya, Culavagga, chap. 6. [Vin ii.146–47].

The most complete explanation of *satipatthana* occurs in Digha Nikaya, Mahasatipatthana Sutta (sutta 22). [D ii.290]

"Fulfil all your duties…" Bhagavad Gita III, 8, 9.

Magha Puja is a day in the Buddhist calendar that commemorates the spontaneous gathering of 1,250 enlightened disciples at the Buddha's dwelling place in the Bamboo Grove. At that gathering, the Buddha gave a brief exhortation on the standards and references of his Dhamma (Ovada-Patimokkha):

To refrain from harmful speech or action,
to have self control according to the Patimokkha,
to know what is sufficient in taking food,
to dwell in a place of seclusion,
to make efforts to practise with a pure heart:
these are the teachings of all Buddhas.

Digha Nikaya, Mahapadana Sutta (sutta 14) [D ii.50], and Dhammapada, verses 183–85. [Dhp 183–85]

Raven-Hart (1956), who made a pilgrimage five years after Indian independence, describes Savatthi as bare and open. So the tree planting probably dates from the restoration of the holy places in 1956 to commemorate the 2,500-year anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment. The gardens at Kushinagar must have been laid out then, too, and by the same person, as they were done equally well. As both sites are in Uttar Pradesh, and as the Bihar sites are unplanted, it points to the designer working for the U.P. state government. Whoever it was, we really enjoyed their work.

The prison organisation Anguilimala was founded and is led by an English bhikkhu, Ven. Khemadhammo, also a disciple of Ajahn Chah in the Thai forest tradition. He is based at: The Forest Hermitage, Lower Fulbrook, near Sherbourne, Warwickshire, CV38 8AS, England.

Chapter 23: The First Goodbye

Some of the relics found in the original Piprahwa excavation in 1898 by the landowner, William Peppe, were recently discovered in the stores of the Buddhist Society in London. Their research unearthed another cache still owned by his family. Since our visit the Lumbini Development Project has managed to move on, and there are now a few completed modern temples and guest houses on the site. However, it is still beset with problems, much of them due to corruption. See Castleman 1999 for a more up-to-date description of the site and details on the project and all its problems. This includes the killing in 1997 of a Japanese monk unpopular because of complaining about the lack of progress.

"the news gathered a blinding storm around it…and a number of scholars, mainly from Nepal, took recourse to the most unbecoming language." This is part of the wonderfully Indian introduction to a book by the archaeologist who made the recent excavation and discovery (Srivastava 1986).

"The son of a slave has sat on this seat," "Let them pour milk over my seat to purify

it. When I am king I will wash the place with the blood of their hearts," "Be not concerned, King, the shade of my kinsmen keeps me cool" and "killed all the people he found without caring whether they were man or child." Jataka IV, Bhadda-sala jataka, no. 465. [Jat iv.145,152]

All compounded things are impermanent… One of the traditional chants used at Buddhist funerals.

The account of the Tibetan pilgrim Dharmavamsin, or Chag Lotsawa, was translated by Roerich (1959).

Chapter 24: Coming Up for Light

Geographical details from Lall 1981 and Ives and Messerli 1989, history of Nepalese Buddhism from Lienhard 1984, and information on the Newar Buddhists today from Gellner 1992. Information on Theravada Buddhism in Nepal came from Amritananda 1986. Sangharakshita (1976), the founder of the FWBO, gives an account of walking from Lumbini to Tansen in 1950. This was before any proper roads were built, when most of the area was still covered in forest and the few communities (including Butwal) were much more impoverished. He met three characters we also met forty years later—Anagarika Munindra, who he walked with and we met in Calcutta; Ven. Shakyananda, who was even then the resident monk in Tansen; and the nun Sushila at the Mahacetiya *vihara,* where he stayed. Of particular note is how repressed the Newars and Buddhism were then, under the Rana regime.

Chapter 25: Once Upon a Time

We met two of the traditional tribal peoples of the *terai*. The fishermen, such as the one who paddled us across the river, are the Bhote, and the village with the tourist lodges is Tharu, although in reality all the lodges and other business are Nepalese. Information on tribal peoples is in MacDonald 1975 and Pyakuryal 1986; information on population change in the Nepal *terai* came from Kayastha & Giri 1986. The book referred to on Chitwan is by Sunquist & Sunquist (1988), and the account of the Korean pilgrim Hye Ch'o is translated by Yang et al. (no date). There is a wonderfull 1722 acoount by the Jesuit Father Desideri of his journey on foot through this same area (See Sweet 2010).

Chapter 26: The Last Stretch

It is Ives and Messerli (1989) (or see Ives 1991) who argue that deforestation is not proven to cause extra silt in the rivers of the Ganges plain. Information on the Nepali tribes came from Gautam and Thapa-Magar 1994, and that on Newari customs from Gellner 1992. Ajahn Sucitto refers to how the Newars gave their name to the nation. To recognise the connection more clearly, soften the "p" and the "l" of Nepal in accordance with Indian usage and pronounce it, as they do, to rhyme with "neighbour."

Chapter 27: Bringing It All Back Home

Thus you should train yourself…. Udana, chap. 1, 10. [Ud 8]

Whatever samanas and brahmins have said…. Udana, chap. 3, 10. [Ud 33]

If there is no senior teacher among the bhikkhunis…. Digha Nikaya, Pasadaka sutta (sutta 29). [D iii.123]

The FWBO was set up in England in 1967, and because of its early history there has always been a coolness between it and the Theravadan forest sangha. The founder of the order, Sangharakshita, was an Englishman who became a Theravada monk in India in the 1950s. In 1964 he was invited to England by the same English Sangha Trust who later invited Ajahn Chah to send Ajahn Sumedho. Sangharakshita stayed in the same Hampstead *vihara* as Ajahn Sumedho later did, but he then fell out with the trust. Sangharakshita puts the falling out down to the stuffy trustees who disapproved of the kind of young people he was attracting in London in the late 1960s, but the trustees say it was the standard of his Vinaya. When he returned for a visit to India in 1966, they wrote to tell him he wasn't welcome back at the *vihara*. He has since written that he then vowed to return to Britain to teach them a lesson. He came back a year later to set up the Western Buddhist Order, and later the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, to support it. In India, Sangharakshita had also been initiated into Tibetan teachings, and his new order has attempted to take the best from each of the traditional forms of Buddhism to make a new "Western" version. This is perhaps why the FWBO can sometimes appear to have a problem with the Eastern, traditional, forms of Buddhism that are now successfully establishing in the West. See Batchelor 1994 and Subhuti 1995.

Information on Newar customs from Gellner 1992; information on Tibetan Buddhism from Snelling 1987 and Batchelor 1994; Sunquist & Sunquist 1988 and Hoskin 1974 were used to help remember what Kathmandu looked like.

Chapter 28: Up, Down, Over, and Out

Glossary

The first time a foreign word or Buddhist term is used in the text we have generally defined it. There are, however, too many for anyone to remember. This glossary covers any such words used in more than one place in the text.

Abhidhamma (*Pali*). One of the "three baskets" of the Theravada Buddhist canon; deals with the psychology of the mind and the refined states of experience found through meditation.

Advaita Vedanta (*Sanskrit*). School of non-dualistic philosophy established by Shankara in the eighth century as part of the revival of Vedic religions.

acchaa (*Hindi*). "I understand." Very common expression, equivalent to "O.K."

Ajahn (*Thai*). From the Pali *achariya,* a Buddhist monk's preceptor: "teacher"; often used as a title of the senior monk or monks at a monastery. In the West, the forest tradition uses it for all monks and nuns of more than ten years' seniority.

anagarika (*Pali*). "Homeless one"; a Buddhist following the eight precepts (which includes celibacy) and usually living in a monastery.

anapanasati (*Pali*). "Awareness of inhalation and exhalation"; using the breath as a meditation object. A simple meditation exercise much recommended by the Buddha.

anjali (*Pali*). Hands held together as a gesture of respect; still prevalent in India today.

arahant (*Pali*). An enlightened being, free from all delusion.

baksheesh (*Hindi*). Tip, alms, or bribe.

beedee (*Hindi*). A small cigarette made from tobacco rolled in a leaf.

betel (*Hindi*). Nut used in *pan*, a concoction sold for chewing. A mild stimulant, it gives the mouth a distinctive red stain.

Bhante (*Pali*). "Venerable sir"; a term of respect often used when addressing a Buddhist monk or by a monk addressing a more senior monk.

bhikkhu (*Pali*). "Alms mendicant"; a fully ordained Buddhist monk. The word *baksheesh* comes from the same root.

bhikkhuni (*Pali*). A Buddhist nun, female equivalent to 'bhikkhu'.

bodhi tree (*Sanskrit/English*). The tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment or any tree of the same species, *Ficus religious*, a large spreading fig.

bodhisattva (*Sanskrit*). "Awakening being"; a being who aspires to become a Buddha for the purpose of helping others reach the same goal. An important concept in Mahayana Buddhism.

brahmin (*Hindi*). Traditionally, a Hindu priest and a social caste. Within the Indian caste system, the caste of brahmin is regarded, particularly by brahmins, as being the highest. Many of the caste no longer act as priests, but all wear the traditional length of string over one shoulder and under the other arm and perform a daily personal purification *puja* with water. The Buddha appropriated the word *brahmin* to mean a spiritually adept being of any origin rather than the members of a single social caste.

Buddha (*Pali/Sanskrit*). "Awakened one"; one who has attained complete enlightenment without the teachings of others. A sammasambuddha (like Gotama) also has the optimal capacity to benefit others. A paccekabuddha does not teach.

chai (*Hindi*). Tea, usually made in an open pot with tea dust, milk, sugar, and sometimes spice, then strained into cups.

chalo (*Hindi*). "Go"; frequently used as a command.

chhang (*Tibetan*). Barley beer.

chappati (*Hindi*). A thin flat round bread made from unleavened flour. In India the generic word for bread, *roti*, is more commonly used.

chaitya (*Sanskrit*). Another word for *stupa*.

chaukidar (*Hindi*). Caretaker.

chillum (*Hindi*). A simple smoking pipe that consists of a short cone of clay held nestled in two hands with the smoker sucking between the palms. It is usually used to smoke *ganja*.

dacoit (*Hindi*). Robber, usually those robbers living a fugitive life in the jungle.

dak bungalow (*Hindi*). A resthouse established for government officers to stay in when on tour of the local district. Most small towns in India have one.

dana (*Pali/Sanskrit*). "Giving"; often used to refer to an offering, particularly food, to Buddhist monastics.

desana (*Pali/Hindi*). A religious talk or sermon.

deva (*Pali/Sanskrit*). "Celestial being"; usually resides in a heavenly realm but may visit this realm.

dhal (*Hindi*). Lentils, or the ubiquitous dish made with lentils that is usually spicy and hot with chilli and is runny and sometimes oily.

Dhamma (*Pali*) **/ dharma** (*Sanskrit/Hindi*). *Dhamma* and *dharma* in the text means a variety of things. As a Buddhist term, *Dhamma* and Dharma can mean "nature," a thing as it is, or phenomenon. Spelt with a capital it means the Way It Is, the ultimate reality, and the Buddha's teaching on that reality (a Buddhist takes refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha). The Hindi word *dharma* means duty, particularly religious duty, but also duty to one's family, caste, and society.

dharmashala (*Hindi*) "Religious house"; In villages this is a hall or meeting place where pilgrims can also stop. In larger Indian towns they are accommodation buildings for pilgrims. The accommodation is always very basic and either free or very cheap.

dhoti (*Hindi*). A garment consisting of a long length of cloth that is wrapped in a complicated way around the legs of Indian men.

dhutanga (*Pali*) (*Thai: tudong*). Special austere observances. Dhutanga bhikkhus are noted for their diligence and strictness. Such monks often undertake the mendicant's wandering practice of the Buddha's time—hence the phrase "to go on Tudong."

dhyana (*Sanskrit*) (*jhana* in Pali). Absorption meditation.

dukkha (*Pali*). "Painful" or "hard to bear"; the dis-ease, discontent, suffering, anguish, or unsatisfactoriness referred to in the Buddha's first noble truth. Liberation from this is the Buddhist goal.

fruitee. Mango juice drink sold in cartons throughout India.

ganja (*Hindi*). The drug cannabis in leaf form.

garam (*Hindi*). Hot.

ghat (*Hindi*). A riverside quay.

ghee (*Hindi*). Clarified butter used as a cooking oil.

gompa (*Tibetan*). "A dwelling in the solitude"; originally a hermitage but now also used for a Tibetan monastery or temple.

gurdwara (*Hindi*). Sikh temple.

himal (*Nepali*). Snow-covered mountain.

Itihasas (*Hindi*). The Hindu epic poems *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The first has a legendary author, Vyasa, and the second an original author, Valmiki. Both have evolved over centuries to outgrow any clear attempt at an "original" date or single author. It seems that in their finished forms they are both post-Buddha, though they contain earlier legendary material.

jaggery (*Hindi*). Raw cane sugar.

Jai Ram (*Hindi*). A salutation to Ram oft repeated by his followers. For *Ram,* see Principal Characters.

jongrom (*Pali*). Walking meditation.

Kaha ja ra hai? (*Hindi*). "Where are you going?"

Kar Sevak (*Hindi*). Hindu "holy workers"; the storm troopers of the recent Hindu fundamentalist movement against the Muslim mosque said to have been built on the birthplace of Ram in Ayodhya.

kalyanamitta (*Pali*). A friend on the spiritual path.

khadi (*Hindi*). Hand-woven cloth. The movement initiated by Gandhi to promote the hand-produced goods made in Indian villages.

koan (*Japanese*). "Public case"; a record of an encounter between a teacher and student in which an experience of enlightenment is triggered. Koans are used as objects of meditation in Zen Buddhism as a way of taking the practitioner away from rational deductive thinking.

kolwah (*Hindi*). Solids separated from milk that are the basis of *barfi*, Indian milk sweets. This may have been one of the foods made allowable by the Buddha for monks to eat in the afternoon and to keep for up to seven days.

kuti (*Pali*). Hut; typical abode of forest monastery bhikkhu.

lama (*Tibetan*). A religious teacher, lay or ordained.

lingam (*Sanskrit*). Phallic object of worship in Hinduism, associated with the worship of *Shiva*.

maechee (*Thai*). Nun – a woman living according to the eight precepts, with a shaven-head and putting aside household duties. This, rather than bhikkhuni is the form most used in Thailand at this time.

Mahabharata (*Sanskrit*). The longest Hindu epic, several times as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.

mahavihara (*Pali*). Large *vihara*. The term used for the large monastic universities that arose in India from the fifth century on.

Mahayana (*Sanskrit*). "Great Vehicle"; a movement in Buddhism that emphasises 'emptiness', compassion and assisting all living beings. This movement arose in India in the first centuries C.E. and subsequently spread to the Himalayan countries and East Asia.

mala (*Pali/Sanskrit*). "Ornament," such as a necklace; today usually used to mean a rosary. The clicking movement of *mala* beads through the hand is a way of counting and supporting the chanting of *mantras*.

mandala (*Sanskrit*). "Disc"; a circular highly symbolic tableau used as an object of meditation in Mahayana Buddhism.

mantra (*Sanskrit*). Word or phrase repeated as a concentration object or as a mystical invocation.

Mataji (*Hindi*). Mother. The -ji suffix (as with Gandhi-ji and Goenka-ji) denotes respect.

mudra (*Sanskrit*). Symbolic gesture of the hand. Buddha *rupas* may have one of several mudras.

mukhiya (*Hindi*). Head man of a village.

naga (*Pali*). Serpents, often hooded, that play roles in Buddhist and Hindu mythology. Many were converted by the Buddha, and they are often portrayed as protectors of the Dhamma.

namaste (*Sanskrit/Hindi*). "I salute you"; the common word of greeting and parting in India and Nepal.

Naxalites (*Hindi*). A group of anarchists originally in West Bengal who later retreated to the forests. It is a term now used for any anti-government terrorist or robber living in the jungle.

Newar (*Newari*). The people of the Kathmandu Valley who have now also become the main merchant class throughout Nepal.

nirvana (*Sanskrit*) (*nibbana* in Pali). Cessation of the origins of suffering: delusion and craving.

nullah (*Hindi*). Small river gorge running through forest. For most of the year with a small stream in it or dry but a torrent in the rainy season.

pahar (*Nepali*). Hill.

paisa (*Hindi*). Indian small-denomination coinage. There are 100 *paisa* to 1 *rupee*.

parinirvana (*Sanskrit*). "Final extinction"; the Buddha on his death is said to have passed into *parinirvana*.

paritta (*Pali*). "Protection"; Buddhist scriptures chanted as a blessing or protection.

parotha (*Hindi*). Flat bread fried in *ghee*.

Patimokkha (*Pali*). "A bond"; the 227 rules that every bhikkhu (311 for bhikshunis) should observe to support moral virtue, sense restraint, and good conduct.

precepts (five, eight, and ten). Basic codes of conduct recommended by the Buddha for his followers. The five precepts pertain to the ordinary "household" life, while the eight and ten precepts form the foundation of the renunciant life. Nick tried to keep the eight precepts on the walk: to refrain from lying and other harmful speech, stealing, killing, sexual activity, drink, and drugs, to not eat after midday, to use no adornments, to not go to shows, and to not use a luxurious bed.

puja (*Pali/Hindi*). Act of worship or chanting.

puri (*Hindi*). Small flat bread fried in deep oil that puffs up to form a small inflated disc.

Puranas (*Hindi/Sanskrit*). "Ancient texts"; not as ancient as the Rig Veda, they are a series of tales recounting, and bringing to the fore, the characters of Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, and so on. Probably composed a few centuries after the Buddha, these are the religious texts that the lower castes in India are allowed to hear and thus represent the core of what Westerners call "Hinduism"—the populist, devotional aspect of Vedic tradition.

Ramayana. "The adventures of Rama"; one of the two Hindu religious epics.

refuges (*English*). The three refuges that all Buddhist are encouraged to take and keep—Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*.

Rinpoche (*Tibetan*). "Precious one"; a title of respect given to Tibetan lamas of high rank, typically those recognised as reincarnations of earlier teachers.

roti (*Hindi*). "Bread"; all flat breads such as *chappati, puri, parotha,* and *nan*.

rupa (*Pali*). "Form"; here, a statue.

rupee (*Hindi*). Principal unit of currency in India and Nepal. At the time of the pilgrimage one pound sterling was worth about 50 Indian rupees and 100 Nepalese rupees, a U.S. dollar about 30 Indian and 60 Nepalese rupees.

sabong (*Thai)*. "Sarong"; a simple wrapped cloth worn by men. This is the name used for the under-robe worn by bhikkhus.

sadhu (*Hindi*). Wandering holy man. Formalised by Shankara into orders, bringing the wandering *samana* ethic into the main stream. Anyone can become a sadhu, for a person who becomes one renounces caste and takes on a life outside of, but supported by, secular society. Sadhus live by begging food and money and are usually dressed in ochre robes and often covered in dobs of paint to signify the deity they follow. In Pali *sadhu* is an exclamation meaning "it is well," used by listeners at the end of a Buddhist *desana*.

samadhi (*Pali*). "Collectedness"; mental calm, a concentrated, equanimous state of mind in which excitement and dullness are overcome.

samana (*Pali*). One who has entered the holy life; a religious. Formerly a loosely defined movement of religious seekers in India on the fringes of or outside of the Vedic mainstream, which they probably pre-date.

samanera (*Pali*). Novice stage for a bhikkhu. A samanera lives within the ten precepts, but does not follow the complete bhikkhu Vinaya.

samsara (*Sanskrit*). The frustrating repetitive round of birth and death; the opposite of *nirvana*.

sangha (*Pali*). "Order"; community of those who follow the Buddha's path. Often, more specifically, those who have committed themselves to a monastic training. One of the three refuges of a practising Buddhist.

sanghati (*Pali*). The upper robe of a bhikkhu. Today usually not worn very often but draped over the left shoulder for formal occasions. It is made out of many pieces of cloth sown together.

satsang (*Hindi*). An audience granted by a religious guru; can consist of a *desana,* an interview, or silence.

sepoy (*Hindi*). Soldier.

shika (*Hindi*). Feudal hunting area. In the Ganges Plain these were the only areas of jungle left by the end of the British Raj and the fall of the Indian rajas. They became state-owned forest or game reserves and got little protection. Many are now nature reserves.

sila (*Pali*). Buddhist morality. The precepts that Buddhists are expected to observe.

sitting cloth. A rectangular sheet, just big enough to sit on cross-legged, that is made of four patches and comprises a standard part of a bhikkhu's kit.

stupa (*Sanskrit*). Hemispherical mound wherein sacred relics of the Buddha or other revered religious person may be enshrined.

subjee (*Hindi*). Fried vegetables. Along with rice, *roti,* and *dhal,* part of the basic meal throughout northern India.

sutta/sutra (*Pali/Sanskrit*). A Buddhist discourse attributed to Gotama Buddha.

tabla (*Hindi*). Hand-played drum.

Tamang Tibeto-Burman tribe that probably migrated West along the Himalayas over a thousand years ago and is now distributed throughout the hills of the middle Himalaya.

thangka (*Tibetan*). A religious painting on cloth, often of a Buddha or a mandala, that is mounted on a scroll and often framed in brocade.

tantra (*Sanskrit*). "Continuum," "weave," or "web"; a Buddhist text attributed to Gotama or another Buddha that describes an accelerated path to enlightenment by means of mantra, transformative imagination, and yogic exercises. Also refers to the corpus of practices described by such texts.

terai (*Hindi/Nepali* from *Farsi*). "Swamp"; the undulating swampy lowlands at the base of the Himalaya.

Tharu (*Nepali*). Tribe native to the Nepalese *terai*.

Theravada (*Pali*). "Way of the Elders"; The "southern" and oldest still-existing school of Buddhism. Now found in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka.

thik (*Hindi*). "Yes" or "O.K."

uttarasangha (*Pali*). The principal outer robe worn by a *bhikkhu*.

vajra (*Sanskrit*). A symbolic thunderbolt, a small double-ended sceptre representing the energy of sacred power and skilful means in *Vajrayana* Buddhism.

Vajrayana (*Sanskrit*). "Diamond vehicle"; the path to enlightenment as described in the Buddhist *tantras*. A development from Mahayana Buddhism that makes use of mantras, visualisation and subtle energies. It developed in Tibet and Nepal.

vassa (*Pali*). "Rains"; the three months of the rainy season. The time from the full moon of July until the full moon of October, when Buddhist monks have to reside at a single residence.

vihara (*Pali*). "Dwelling"; used in early Indian Buddhism as the name for any dwelling. Today it usually means a small monastery.

Vinaya (*Pali/Sanskrit*). The monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries.

vipassana (*Pali*). Penetrative insight of meditation, as distinguished from *samatha*, the tranquillity of meditation. This is the name also given to a Buddhist meditation movement particularly popular in North America.

wallah (*Hindi*). "Worker"; thus rickshaw-wallah, *chai*-wallah, and so on.

wat (*Thai*). Monastery.

yakkha (*Pali*). Superhuman beings, sometimes demonic and usually looking pretty scary when portrayed, but some are harmless to humans and there are stories of them being converted to Buddhism.

Characters

The nature of this book means that there are many characters and religious deities. Most are described when they are first introduced. The following lists those that occur in more than one section.

Ambedkar, Dr. B. R. Prominent politician in the early days of the modern Indian state. Though an untouchable, he became a barrister at the London Bar. He chaired the committee that drafted the state's new constitution and insisted on incorporating equal rights for untouchables, or Dalits. He later led many of his Dalit followers into conversion to Buddhism as a way for them to step out of the Indian caste system. Mass conversions of thousands of untouchables continue to this day.

Ashoka. Great Indian emperor who ruled over all of northern and central India in the third century B.C.E. Ashoka became a devout Buddhist and gave up his previous bloody expansionist policy to apply Buddhist principles in the reform of the administrative and judicial systems, erecting pillars with edicts on how his people were to behave justly and wisely. He was very important in the history of Buddhism, reforming the Sangha, promoting Buddhism in India, and sending teaching monks on many foreign missions that resulted in its expansion abroad. He also set up many Buddhist *stupas* and made the first recorded pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places.

Atisha. Indian Buddhist master from the great university of Vikramashila in the eastern part of present-day Bihar who went to Tibet in the eleventh century. He was one of several important people in the first reformation and second transmission of Tibetan Buddhism and the founder of the Kadam tradition.

Avalokiteshvara. The bodhisattva who personifies compassion and whose mantra is *Om mani padme hum*. Tibetans, who call him Chenrezig, believe he manifests as the Dalai Lama. In East Asia, Avalokiteshvara became female and is known as Kwanyin in China and as Kannon in Japan.

Brahma. The creator of the universe. In the Hindu Puranas, he is a divinity comparable to, but never as revered as, Shiva and Vishnu. In Buddhism there are several Brahmas living in successively higher heavens, of vast life span, but still subject to birth and death.

Brahman. The formless godhead in the Upanishads, counterposed to Atman, the soul, which is an aspect of Brahman (and possibly vice versa).

Chah, Ajahn. Buddhist monk and meditation master of the Thai forest tradition. He was the teacher of Ajahn Sumedho and other senior Western monks now the abbots of monasteries in the West. Ajahn Chah died in 1992.

Cohen, Andrew. American meditation teacher and guru. Originally a student of the Indian Advaita Vedanta Guru Poonja-ji and the Buddhist *Vipassana* meditation movement, Cohen had an enlightenment experience and then set himself up as a meditation teacher and guru on his own.

Cunningham, Sir Alexander. British archaeologist of the nineteenth century and the first Director General of the Indian Archaeological Survey. Previously he had been a distinguished administrator, surveyor, and engineer who did archaeology in his spare time. He was particularly interested in India's lost Buddhist past, and he discovered many of the Buddhist holy sites.

Dalai Lama. The most senior lama of Tibetan Buddhism and also, until the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the head of Tibet's religio-political hierarchy. A reincarnate lama, the present Dalai Lama is the fourteenth in his line.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. High reincarnate lama in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. At the time of our visit he was in his eighties and was regarded as the senior lama in that school.

Fa Hsien. The first Chinese pilgrim to visit the Buddhist holy places in India and to leave a record on returning to China. He set out in 399 C.E. and returned in 414.

Goenka, S. N. A meditation teacher and Indian disciple of the Burmese teacher U Ba Khin. Previously, he had been a successful business man and is still a great organiser. He was the first to teach ten-day intensive meditation retreats or "courses," a format now adopted by many other teachers. He resides in India but teaches around the world. Goenka was Nick Scott's first teacher.

Gotama. The name of the historical Buddha, as opposed to the Buddhas that are said to have occurred in the remote past or are yet to come.

Hanuman. The Hindu god in monkey form who is the epitome of service and loyalty. Hanuman is the ever-faithful servant to Ram, for whom he uses his superhuman powers to zealously perform any task.

Hsuan Tsiang. The most well known of the Chinese pilgrims to visit the Buddhist holy lands. Born in 604 C.E., he resided in India from 635–40 at the great monastic university Nalanda, where he became a famous scholar. On returning to China he wrote an account of his Indian pilgrimage so detailed that it has become the most important source of information about central Asia and India during the seventh century.

Kali. A manifestation of Shiva's consort in a horrible form representing destruction, time, and death. She is usually portrayed as a black goddess with a long protruding red tongue and a garland of severed heads about her neck.

Karmapa. High Tibetan reincarnate lama who is the spiritual head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. The reincarnation Nick met in the early 1970s was the sixteenth and has since died. The seventeenth Karmapa is now a young man.

Krishna. An *avatar*, or incarnation, of the Hindu god Vishnu. Krishna is now very popular in India, where he can be seen everywhere in paintings as a child, an adolescent, or as an adult, always portrayed in blue or black, and often playing a flute.

Manjushri. The bodhisattva who personifies wisdom, he is usually portrayed holding a raised sword to represent the ability of insight to cut through the fetter of delusion.

Mara. The personification of death, temptation, and evil.

Master Hua. Chinese meditation master and founder of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas monastery in California. Ajahn Sucitto met him before leaving on the pilgrimage. He died in 1994.

Maya (*Pali / Sanskrit*). "Illusion"; also the name of the mother of Gotama Buddha.

Padmasambhava. A legendary figure who was very important in the first introduction and spread of Buddhism into Tibet in the eighth century. Part monk, shaman, yogi, and scholar who taught and travelled throughout the Himalayas. Many stories exist of his battles with demons and other anti-Buddhist forces, probably reflecting his importance in introducing Buddhism against the resistance of the native Bon religion. He is akin to Saint Patrick in primitive Ireland, and like him there are now many holy places where he performed these exorcisms. The earliest school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Nyingma, derives from him and pays him special reverence, calling him Guru Rinpoche.

Prajnaparamita. "Perfection of wisdom." Originally a concept and teaching on the emptiness of all phenomena that is one of the basic tenets of the Mahayana school, Prajnaparamita was later personified as a female deity, the wisdom that is "mother of all buddhas."

Rama. A human incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. The story of how he killed a demon king grew into the great Indian epic *Ramayana*.

Sarasvasti. Originally an ancient river goddess, she is now the Hindu goddess of learning and wisdom and the patron deity of music and the

arts. She is usually conceived of as the consort of one of the three principal Hindu gods: Vishnu, Brahma, or Shiva.

Shankara. A great reformer of the Vedic tradition. He lived a short but highly influential life in the eighth century, establishing Advaita Vedanta to oppose Buddhist contemplative wisdom and four orders of sadhus as a counterpoise to the bhikkhu sangha.

Shiva. Hindu god who represents destruction and re-creation. He is always seen as an ascetic and depicted with a topknot of hair and holding a trident and usually clad in a tiger skin.

Sumedho, Ajahn. A Buddhist monk, meditation master, and founder of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery and Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, from which most other forest monasteries in the West have come. He is the teacher of both authors.

Titmuss, Christopher. English meditation teacher and social activist who trained as a monk in Thailand and India from 1970–76. He is also co-founder of Gaia House, a Buddhist retreat and teaching centre in Devon, U.K.

Vishnu. The Hindu God of continuity and preservation. He has many *avatars*, or incarnations, the best known of which are *Rama* and *Krishna*. Hindus sometimes count the Buddha as his *avatar* as well.

Recommended Reading

Buddhist Pilgrimage

Middle Land, Middle Way: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Buddha's India. Shravasti Dhammika. Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1992. If this excellent and concise pocket book had been available to us for our pilgrimage, we would have seen and understood much more of the Buddhist holy sites, and probably had far fewer adventures. Thoroughly recommended for anyone going on pilgrimage to the holy places.

Buddhist Teachings

What the Buddha Taught. Walpala Rahula. Many editions.

The Heart of Buddhist Meditation. Nyanaponika Thera. London: Rider, 1983.

In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon. Edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom, 2005.

Teachings from the Theravada Forest Tradition

The Mind and the Way: Buddhist Reflections on Life. Ajahn Sumedho. Boston: Wisdom, 1995 (Published in England by Rider).

Sound of Silence: The Selected Teachings of Ajahn Sumedho. Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro. Boston: Wisdom, 2007.

Turning the Wheel of Truth: Commentary on the Buddha's First Teaching. Ajahn Sucitto. Boston: Shambhala, 2010.

Food for the Heart: The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah. Boston: Wisdom, 2002

Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha's Teachings. Ajahn Chah. Translated by Paul Brieter. Boston: Shambala, 2001.

A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah. Edited by Jack Kornfield and Paul Brieter. Wheaton, Illinois: Quest, 1985.

Venerable Father: A Life with Ajahn Chah. Paul Breiter. Buddhadhamma Foundation, Tesabahl Songkroh Rd., Lad Yao, Chatuchak, Bangkok, 10900 Thailand, 1994. Reprint: New York: Paraview, 2004.

Amaravati Publications publishes teachings by monks in the forest tradition, including Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Sucitto. The books have been sponsored for free distribution. For a current publication list, write, enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope, to Amaravati Publications, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 3BZ, England.

BUDDHIST HISTORY

The Buddha and Five After Centuries. Sukimar Dutt. London, 1957. Reprint available from Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.

The Awakening of the West. Stephen Batchelor. London: Aquarius, 1994. As well as being an excellent account of Europe's historical encounters with Buddhism, this book is also a good introduction to the different forms of Buddhism now established in the West.

INDIAN WILDLIFE

Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent. Martin Woodcock and Harmann Heinzel. London: Collins, 1980. Small, very light, and covering most of the birds likely to be seen on a trip to India.

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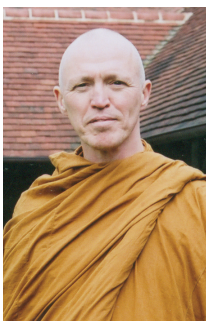
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About the Authors



Ajahn Sucitto was born in London in 1949. After going to university in 1971 to study English Literature he travelled to the East, becoming a bhikkhu in Thailand in 1976. Since 1978 he has been based in Britain as a disciple of Ajahn Sumedho. In 1992 he became the abbot of Cittivaveka, Chithurst Buddhist Monastery. He teaches retreats in Europe and North America, and several books of his teachings have been published for free distribution. One book has also been published for sale, *Turning the Wheel of Truth* (Shambhala, 2010)



Dr. Nick Scott was born in 1952. On leaving school he went to India in 1972, where he became interested in Buddhist meditation. He returned to England three years later to complete a degree and then a doctorate in Plant Ecology. He has worked most of his life in nature conservation, as a nature reserve warden, project manager, and then consultant. He now also teaches meditation retreats. Two further accounts of his jouneys with other Buddhist monks will soon be available.